

LEONARDO M. WILLIAMS

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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[This interview was not edited by Mr. Williams]

Q: Today is January 6, 2003. This is an interview with Leonardo M. Williams. This is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. I'm Charles Stuart Kennedy. Leonardo and I are old friends. We served together in Athens back in the '70s. Let's start with when and where you were born. And can you tell me a little about your family?

WILLIAMS: Okay. I was born in Eufaula, Alabama, in 1945, March 10th, at home.

Q: Let's go over your father first.

WILLIAMS: My father was from Macon, Georgia. He was a lawyer. My mother was also born in Eufaula. She ducked out of high school. She was 19 at the time and was a housewife thereafter.

Q: What brought your father as a lawyer to Eufaula?

WILLIAMS: He wasn't a lawyer at that point. He was still a student himself. They met in college.

Q: Where did they meet in college?

WILLIAMS: I've forgotten. It was one of the small colleges in Alabama.

Q: How long did you live there?

WILLIAMS: We moved around quite a bit. I was in Eufaula until I was two or three initially. Then we came to Washington. This was before my father had gotten his law degree. He lived over in Northeast Washington for about three years. By then I had a couple of brothers and we all went back to Alabama. But at that point we moved to Anniston, where my grandparents were, and stayed with my grandparents while my father went to St. Paul, Minnesota, where he worked in a munitions factory but also finished his education and got his law degree.

Q: Did he go somewhere in St. Paul?

WILLIAMS: Yes, William Mitchell College of Law. It's still there.

Q: What are your early recollections about where you lived? Do they start with Washington?

WILLIAMS: Yes, Washington the first time around. The part of Northeast that I lived in, and I'm not sure if the apartment buildings are still standing, I went back to look at them again in 1969 and it was already pretty run down by then. But it was at the time that we lived there a working class community. There was a lot of social life within the building. My father and his friends from the community there watched fights on Wednesday nights. There was also a lot of open land around it. It looked to me like a forest. But that was pretty much it.

Q: Later on, it really went downhill.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: A lot of drugs and things like that.

WILLIAMS: Yes. But in that first incarnation when I was living there, that was never an issue of crime. I don't even know if I heard the word mentioned there.

Q: How about your grandparents?

WILLIAMS: They were both schoolteachers. My grandfather by then had become principal of one of the black schools in the area. It wasn't in Anniston per se but in a neighboring town, Calhoun County Training School. And my grandmother taught 9th grade in the black high school that was a block from the high school right up the street. She taught English. I don't recall when they went to Anniston, but they spent most of their professional careers there.

Q: Integration didn't get going until sometime later.

WILLIAMS: Right. Sometime after I went to school there. My first time around, we only lived there for a year. I was six at the time. Then we went to St. Paul and there I went to a Catholic school in an integrated neighborhood. But then in the third grade, I moved back and went to the local elementary school, which was segregated.

Q: What was Anniston like?

WILLIAMS: It was about 20,000 people. There were a couple of black neighborhoods. We lived in the one that was on the west. There were three black elementary schools in Anniston, not including the one my grandfather worked at. It was fun. I remember just being free to run around. We had good times. There were woods nearby. It was just a very relaxed atmosphere. However, we were very much aware of the social lines. There was a certain element of fear. There were certain elements you didn't stop in or when you went downtown in the shortcut that went through the park which was for whites only with the nice swimming pool and all the amenities, you didn't get off the sidewalk and when you got downtown, if you were going to the movie, it was the old pattern of blacks sitting upstairs in the back. There was nothing unusual about it.

Q: What were you getting from your parents and grandparents?

WILLIAMS: Well, this was '53, so this was before... That was only beginning to happen...

Q: Brown Versus the Board of Education was 1955, wasn't it?

WILLIAMS: Right.

Q: And it didn't take hold until some years later.

WILLIAMS: Right. '56 is when I left and that's when things were beginning to get stirred up. There was the Alabama bus boycott. But nothing of this sort had happened. I found out later that there was a newspaper there, the "Anniston Star," that the editor had eventually become the major spokesmen in that journalistic role in favor of integration and the "Anniston Star" was actually considered a liberal newspaper in the South. Later, he went on to do USIA speaker tours as an example of the new spirit in the South. But, no, at the time I was there, it was very much the historic pattern.

Q: Sometimes the historic pattern would break down at the kids' level, not in school but after school. Was there any playing together or anything like that?

WILLIAMS: No, because our neighborhoods were pretty segregated. I don't know anyone after that year that had a white friend in Anniston. You'd see a little bit of the breaking down... The paper boys were white, the kids who worked for the "Anniston Star." And they would come through and we'd be out there playing and stuff and they'd stop and play football with us a little bit but never long enough... That would be like for 15 seconds or a couple of minutes at most, but nothing to establish any sense of community. It was still "us and them."

Q: What drove Anniston? Was it farming country?

WILLIAMS: There were three things. One of them has become infamous recently. One was Fort McClellan, so a lot of the money that got spent in town was from personnel out there. The other thing was that it was the "soil pipe center of the world," these big drainage pipes. That was the shorthand that they used to describe the city. And the third thing was Monsanto built a chemical plant up there and apparently was dumping carcinogens in our water. Recently, there was a big lawsuit. Michael Grunwald wrote about it in the "Washington Post" about it about a year ago. There was also another military base, Anniston Army Depot. I don't know exactly what kind of base that was.

Q: You were there until when?

WILLIAMS: We left when I was six, so that was '51. We went to Minnesota. Then I went back in '53. Then I moved back to Minnesota again when I was 12, so that would have been '57.

Q: How did you find elementary school in Anniston?

WILLIAMS: The school, I found out in retrospect, was a really fine education. One of the reasons might have been that that was where most talented black people could get jobs at the time.

Q: Also, I think even overall in the U.S., most talented women could get jobs in schools.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: Now this has moved down, so you don't quite have the same dedication.

WILLIAMS: Right. That's really what it was. Looking back on it, what I remember when I was there was that we had secondhand school books because the state was supposed to provide school books, but we never had enough. There were never any new ones. So, we would have to sit together on our benches and share them. We didn't have the same quality of facilities, recreational, or the normal kind of things one would expect in school. But we did have teachers who felt that they had a mission and worked hard at it. When I went back to Minnesota, I moved into an upper middle class neighborhood, although I wasn't upper middle class anymore by then. I went in and felt I was right on the level with everybody and ahead in some things like English grammar. Looking back, I realize we were probably taught English as a second language because of the handicaps that a lot of us had. So, I never felt I missed a beat. I went from being one of the best students in my elementary school in Alabama to being one of the best in my junior high school.

Q: With the world so separate in Anniston, did you find that you had to put on a different persona - in other words, not use your upper class English or something like that downtown, making sure that you didn't draw attention to yourself?

WILLIAMS: Yes, you didn't want to draw attention to yourself, but you didn't want to go to role playing. It was just that you lived in the black community and that was, particularly for a young kid like myself then, kind of your boundaries.

Q: As kids, you have a small world and once you accommodate to that, what the hell else happens?

WILLIAMS: Yes. But let's say you went outside the neighborhood, obviously, you didn't want to do anything that would make white people notice you. You just kept on your business. But when you encountered them, I don't recall that there was any particular oppressiveness aside from the fact that you were cautious.

Q: Those were rules of the game.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: How about your grandparents and your parents? Were they teaching you how to survive in this particular atmosphere?

WILLIAMS: Yes. I don't remember any specific conversations... Well, I remember going downtown for the first time and being told just to keep going and not be messing around or stopping on anybody's property or anything like that. Then you became wary... A couple of my friends were involved in incidents. One was coming home and three kids jumped him and they stabbed him. Fortunately, it wasn't fatal. He made it home. They eventually were prosecuted and did some jail time. So, there was that element of fairness in the system. He was on the normal route and not doing anything that would attract attention.

Q: Going up to Minnesota, did you all drive or take the train?

WILLIAMS: We drove. We always drove. The first time we went, we drove. We went with my grandfather. We drove up to Chicago and went to a place called Lookout Mountain in Tennessee.

Q: My grandfather fought there. He was an officer in Grant's army.

WILLIAMS: We hit a stone in the road and it bent the oil pan. It was the middle of the night. I remember how nervous my grandmother was that the sun would come out and we'd be out there... She had all the horror stories. We told my grandfather to get that thing fixed fast.

Q: You were in high school in Minnesota?

WILLIAMS: Yes, from the time I was in junior high, 7th grade through Crock College.

Q: Going back to elementary school, how about reading or studies? Was there anything that particularly interested you?

WILLIAMS: I just liked to read. That was from the time I learned how really to read in the second grade. I read a lot. All the books for the year, I'd read in the first month or two. Beyond that, I can't say I had any special interests. I didn't particularly like arithmetic. I remember the first day I saw the word "Czechoslovakia" in a book. I parsed it out. That was in 6th grade. It was something of a premonition because my career obviously, I spent a fair amount of time in Prague.

Q: Getting up to St. Paul, where did you live?

WILLIAMS: My mother and father were divorced, so we lived in the project, over on the east side of St. Paul, which was kind of a normal project, but what was unusual about it was that it was right on the edge of an upper middle class neighborhood, so all my schoolmates... There were us kids from the project, but our schoolmates' fathers were engineers and executives.

Q: You might explain for future people what a project was.

WILLIAMS: It was low income housing. They were set up so there would be four units in a building of two stories. The one we had was three bedrooms. It was operated by either the city or the state. Lots of green area around. Very strict but not oppressive rules of conduct and maintenance.

Q: It wasn't one of these infamous projects, buildings 20 stories tall.

WILLIAMS: No. It was on a much more human scale. There were probably 20 buildings scattered across what looked like parkland in my memory anyway.

Q: You started in junior high. Where did you go to high school?

WILLIAMS: Initially I went to the neighborhood public high school and then I got a scholarship to go to a private Catholic school. By then, I had moved out of the project and that was the local neighborhood high school I was going to. My mother wasn't very pleased with that. It wasn't particularly challenging for me and she saw it. So, with the help of a friend, I got interviewed for a scholarship with this other school back in my old neighborhood on the other side of town and was fortunate to get selected.

Q: Were you Catholic?

WILLIAMS: Yes, I am Catholic and was at the time, too.

Q: I take it your mother was a pushing force.

WILLIAMS: Yes, a very strong force.

Q: What was the name of the Catholic school?

WILLIAMS: Mary T. Hill High School. That was because the money to build it came from the estate of the Hill family, the ones that built the railroad. It was staffed by Christian Brothers who were from a "house," a large organization out of Chicago. It was probably half Christian Brothers and half laypeople.

Q: How did you find the atmosphere?

WILLIAMS: It was muted compared to the exuberant atmosphere I had just come from. It was rigorous in terms of the academics. They guaranteed you three hours of homework every night. Given my lack of skill in math, it usually was much more than that. And I played basketball or football the two years that I was there. That was my contribution to the community. It wasn't an athletic scholarship, but since I had this opportunity to contribute to the community...

Q: You were there in the late '50s?

WILLIAMS: I graduated in '63.

Q: Particularly during the Kennedy time, and even before that, Minnesota was out of the problem area as far as integration goes. Were there any reflections, family talking to other people or looking at what was happening, that you were aware of? I'm thinking of the civil rights movement.

WILLIAMS: No, actually not. St. Paul generally speaking... It was a big issue for me personally in the sense that when I went from Alabama to Minnesota again for junior high school, that's when everything started happening - freedom rides and everything. But by then, I was in a completely different environment. I was one of five black kids in my junior high school. If I ever felt the weight of racism, that was where I felt it the most in those initial weeks, months, in that junior high school. First of all, it was a national issue, so kids were aware of it. And probably where they wouldn't even have thought about it before then... Most of the kids were friendly and I never had any issues with them. There were some I had problems with. But beyond that, the schools I was going to, people were sympathetic, but it's almost like there wasn't enough black people to be a minority.

Q: One thinks of particularly the move from the deep South right up to Detroit and Chicago particularly and Minnesota wasn't on anybody's list. It was too cold.

WILLIAMS: Yes. That's true. Probably more when I got into college - and then I left St. Paul to go to college anyway - then it was more of an issue in the Twin Cities. But compared to what was already going on in other places, it just seemed even to a lot of people who lived there like kind of a joke in part because a lot of the limitations weren't felt. I'm sure they were there.

Q: Was there a Scandinavian mafia? Was the Scandinavian influence important in that area? I'm not talking necessarily of black/white. Were you aware of a Scandinavian culture there?

WILLIAMS: Not living in it. Once you get out and you go back and you look around, suddenly it looks Scandinavian in a lot of respects. But living in it, it was Minnesota. One of the things that surprised me when I got there, and I eventually got used to it as part of the normal discussion among them, is the awareness of their ethnic heritage. They would refer to each other as "Swedes" or "Danes" or "Finns" or whatever. But at the time, that was just who they were. You didn't really associate that with other things later. The liberalism of the state has at least some of its roots there.

Q: Did you find that when you came up there one world that really opened up was the library and all of that?

WILLIAMS: Yes. But that for me wasn't the biggest change. There was a public library in the neighborhood where I lived in Alabama. It would be interesting to go back and see how big it was. It was great when I was there. They were constantly getting new books. When I got to St. Paul, the neighborhood that I lived in actually made me rely more on the school library. The city library was downtown and that was a mile walk to the bus stop and then another 45 minutes on the bus. We had a bookmobile that came to the projects, so I lived off that for a while.

Q: After high school, where was your mother pointing to?

WILLIAMS: From the time I was a little kid, I had always assumed I was going to go to college. I was preparing myself. But I always assumed I would go and when it came time to start looking around, I went close to home. It was St. Thomas College, a Catholic school, in St. Paul, that wasn't too far from where I lived at the time. I was thinking about St. Johns. But I never thought of going far away. The University of Minnesota. I ended up going to St. Johns.

Q: How strict a Catholic education were you getting? Were the Christian Brothers heavy on Catholicism?

WILLIAMS: They were Irish. I don't remember any Slavic or Dutch Christian Brothers. It was pretty strict. The emphasis was on academics and discipline. We had religion every day, usually taught by laypeople.

Q: How about the discipline? Did the Christian Brothers take that over?

WILLIAMS: Yes. And it was strict. If you're interested in examples, one time, one of my classmates, we were seniors and it was the second semester... He had to stop in one of the offices to see one of the officials and the official wasn't there. But this fellow had some insulting words to say to the lady who worked there. Ten minutes later, we were in physics class, and there was a knock on the door and the door opened. One of the Brothers was there and said, "Mr. Gobule, come with me." And that was the last time I ever saw him. He was thrown out. He had to go someplace else to graduate. For certain things, you could cross the line. There was still corporal punishment. But then you could stay in school. But there were certain things that were just considered unacceptable behavior and he crossed that line.

Q: So, you graduated in what year?

WILLIAMS: '63.

Q: During this time, where politically was your home?

WILLIAMS: Democratic Party. In fact, I worked in Kennedy's campaign. They had some kind of mailing and I remember going down there with my mother and stuffing envelopes and that type of thing.

Q: Did you have any summer jobs?

WILLIAMS: Yes. I finally got a summer job when I was 17. It was filling in for the summer vacations of the different elevator operators in the First National Bank building in St. Paul. That's what I did that summer and every summer until the summer I was 21, when I came to Washington and worked as an intern.

Q: So you went to St. Johns University.

WILLIAMS: In Collegeville, Minnesota.

Q: What was it like? How big was it?

WILLIAMS: It was 1,500-2,000. It was an all men's school. It was founded at a Benedictine monastery. It was established in 1857. The monastery was older. It was a mix of Benedictine priests and brothers and laypeople. It was out in the woods, as you would expect a monastery to be, a beautiful setting, good facilities for a college that small. The emphasis was on character as well as on academics. It was very well founded in the community.

Q: This was about the time of Pope John XXIII. Did that hit the place? This was the Pope who called the Second Vatican Council. This hit the Catholic church rather fundamentally. Did that change anything at all?

WILLIAMS: Yes, in a number of ways. First of all, St. Johns was considered to be one of the centers of thinking about reforming the liturgy, the way the religion is practiced. They had this manuscript library, so it was a center of scholarship within the Church anyway. So, apparently, I didn't get that heavily into it at the time, but I can remember some people relating how things were going in terms of the reforms that were being contemplated and promoted. The St. Johns community had a leadership role in that. Where we saw it in the classroom was that our theology classes were much more liberal in terms of the teaching of the Church doctrine starting with the Bible. Every year, you had to take a semester of theology. The first year was Old Testament. When we started getting into it, the new interpretations of the Bible, that as students of Catholic school before we hadn't been exposed to more liberal interpretations and less literal things... Just the atmosphere, people being upset in the room, being told certain things or at least having certain things posited.

Q: One always thinks of the period where the most mortal sin you could commit was eating meat on Friday.

WILLIAMS: That was before puberty.

Q: What were you majoring in?

WILLIAMS: I majored in English. I wanted to get a minor in history, but I could never get my courses set up... I needed an American history course, a survey course, which I never in the four years I was there could fit in. Those were my main interests. I think it reflected the optimism of the era. I just wanted to learn as much as I could about as many things as I could that didn't have to do with mathematics.

Q: How about the outside world, the CW or that sort of thing?

WILLIAMS: Only Vietnam and Vietnam in a way different from what was going on in the outside world. There was an ROTC program there. Everybody had to take it their first two years and then after that it was just the guys that were going into the Army after college. Of the issues of the day, the one that seemed to be more present in our consciousness was Vietnam. A lot of the guys when they graduated were meeting units in Vietnam even in that early stage of the war. And we were getting things back essentially promoting the war. Our guys were seeing what was going on in Vietnam and what was happening there. The campus was very supportive of that war in the time that I was there. It wasn't until after I went to graduate school that there was a serious objection.

Q: Did you have any extracurricular activities that you were interested in?

WILLIAMS: No, actually, I probably over-studied, over-prepared, for most of my courses. It was kind of the normal thing other than getting out, going into town, going home. Intramural sports, things like that. I probably over-prepared for most of my courses.

Q: You graduated in '67. The draft was big. What happened with you?

WILLIAMS: During my junior year, I applied for a program called the Foreign Affairs Scholars Program funded by the Ford Foundation to encourage minorities to look at the FS (Foreign Service) as a career. I had never even heard of the FS. I remember when I learned about that course, I was walking down the hall and I passed the academic dean's office, Father Hillary, who was my Chaucer teacher, and he said, "This is something you might be interested in." It was just a brochure. What it was was an opportunity to come to Washington to work in foreign affairs agencies. So, I sent in for the application and got invited to Chicago for an interview and went down and did that. I was successful, so by the summer of '66, I had a job working in VOA (Voice of America) as an editor for a program called "Forum." I was the editor. One of the things Forum did was, they would do a series on a particular Americana topic like folklore and then they would contract with all these leading scholars in folklore. They would prepare a lecture and then tape it. But it could only be a half an hour long. They would send that tape in with a script. A lot of times, it was 45 minutes long. It was up to me to edit the tape, to go through and say, "Oh, he doesn't know what he's talking about. That's not important." I did that in the summer of '66. Then I graduated. Part of the time you spent going to group things with all the interns from the Department, USIA (United States Information Agency), and AID (Agency for International Development), where they would kind of talk up foreign policy stuff. Your mentor where you worked would talk to you about the career service. It was interesting enough to convince me to take the FS exam. I took that when I went back to school in the fall of '66. I passed the written and took the oral at the beginning of '67. But by then, I had decided I wanted to go to grad school, too. So, I went to graduate school for a year immediately after college. That was the flipside of St. Johns. It was the University of Wisconsin, a bombing on campus and fighting in the streets. And the people in Wisconsin being shocked and trying to decide if they're going to stop letting students come from New York. That was an interesting year. Following that year, I joined USIA.

Q: Do you recall the oral exam, any of the questions?

WILLIAMS: Not really, no. I seem to recall one about James Baldwin and one about the UN (United Nations), one about how I would handle some social situation. But I worked as a part-time examiner some years later and it was very different from what it had been. Then it was just the interview.

Q: You went to the University of Wisconsin from '67 to when?

WILLIAMS: '68.

Q: What were you studying?

WILLIAMS: American military history.

Q: It sounds like there were armed mobs with torches on the campus. The University of Wisconsin was one of the hotbeds of the anti-war movement. It's always been a political university, a very good university. There is a strong radical element there.

WILLIAMS: Somehow they focused on New York. Literally, it was part of the debate in the press about these outsiders that were coming in and stirring up trouble. You'd go to the Ratskeller, have a sandwich, and talk with people and most of it was politics and war in Vietnam. I was for it at the time. Of course, there was the drug scene and LSD. A lot of kids were into that. That used to tickle me. It just struck me that a lot of these people were walking around in costume. One guy's thing was walking around in fatigues with a plastic foot stuck in his back pocket. Then you'd see other different manifestations of their expressing their feelings. It was quite an experience.

Q: Was there a group of students who were saying, "This is all cute, but we're here to get an education and sort of going on and doing their thing?"

WILLIAMS: Yes. In fact, I know that there was that in my seminars. But those in the seminars are the ones that were there for posturing. They had already had their ideological labels that they wore. So, in a seminar, somebody would be discussing their paper on the 1932 elections in Iowa or something like that and then some guy would get up and challenge the whole premise of having this class, much less that topic. The demonstrations and the protests got a lot of attention, but it was still a first class academic institution and that life went on in spite of it. Consider there were over 20,000 students at the University of Wisconsin. Maybe these demonstrations, depending on the topic and the immediacy of the issue, would draw 2-4,000 at the most. A lot of those people headed back to the library when the demonstration was over.

Q: By this time, you had been accepted for USIA?

WILLIAMS: Yes. I had finished the process in the summer of '67.

Q: Was there any choice between USIA and the State Department?

WILLIAMS: When you took the exam, you indicated an interest in which agency you wanted to be considered for. I don't recall whether or not in those days they were as flexible as using each other's rosters or rank ordered lists as they became later. I wanted to do USIA. That was the agency I knew and the kind of work I felt I wanted to do.

Q: At Wisconsin, were you getting any feedback, particularly from the faculty, about the State Department, USIA, etc.?

WILLIAMS: No, not that I recall. I don't recall that they knew that I had that opportunity out there either. In the time I was there, I was really focused on my work and participation in the classes. I don't recall any particular predisposition to any of those agencies.

Q: We're talking about '68 or so?

WILLIAMS: Yes. '68 is when I came in.

Q: You came in when in '68?

WILLIAMS: June of '68.

Q: Was it a separate USIA class?

WILLIAMS: We were all together in the A100 course. It was at the old FSI building in Rosslyn. There were maybe 40 of us in that class. Actually, it was larger. I think there were like 15 from USIA alone, and some from AID. It might have been as many as 60 or so.

Q: Was this still a time when they were saying, "We'll take you in if you're willing to go to Vietnam?" Was Vietnam where a significant number were going?

WILLIAMS: Yes. In my case, I had registered for the Selective Service and had taken the exam while still at graduate school, the medical and everything, and been classified. Before I could go overseas, I had to get permission from the draft board to accept an assignment overseas. And they initially denied it. USIA Personnel had to write a letter to my local draft board saying that they had invested in training me, dah, dah, day, and I had a chance to serve the country this way and would they please relent and let me go? Based on that appeal, they did. The other guys in the class, some were State Department. Some of the State Department guys were assigned to Vietnam, not to the embassy but detailed to AID and CORDS. One of them had to go through that same process. I think all of them did. But his board refused. Even though he was going to Vietnam, they said, "No." I guess they were worried about making their quota. He had to go all the way to the state board, through a couple levels of appeal, before they finally relented and let him go. But that was pretty much how it worked.

Q: How did you find the initial basic officer training?

WILLIAMS: In retrospect, probably not good preparation in detail. It was more useful as familiarization and getting acclimated to a different lifestyle.

Q: That's probably about all they can do.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: Did you feel there was a line drawn between the State Department and USIA? Was there a difference?

WILLIAMS: No, not in that phase. We all were in class together and had to do the same exercises regardless of what agency you were from. We all got the same briefings. When we started the course, as the icebreaker, they had a game of diplomacy going. It was a random selection, the makeup of the teams, to help people get to know one another and also to get a little relief from the daily grind. But at that stage I don't remember any one saying, "Okay, this is for the USIA people. This is for State." It wasn't that way.

Q: Did you have any place you wanted to go?

WILLIAMS: No. There were certain names that kind of had an air of romance for me, like Afghanistan or Turkey. Those were the places I had in mind that might appeal to me. I think I even put them on my list of places you might like to serve as a JOT. In those days in USIA, we were called "junior officer trainees" and we went someplace specifically for a one year training assignment, where we were supposed to get the whole menu of embassy activities but spent time working in USIA-type jobs. My only request was that I not be sent to Delhi because I had been told by those who knew that Delhi was a big embassy and I'd just get lost in there. And of course, that's where I was assigned.

Q: You went to New Delhi from when to when?

WILLIAMS: I got there summer of '69 and stayed until summer of '70. I was there only a year.

Q: How did you find Delhi? First on the job side and then on the Indian side.

WILLIAMS: For the first three months I was in shock. I had never been out of the country before and so I was just trying to cope with all these new things that were coming at me. The work was interesting. I got involved in a lot of different things. It was much different from what I had been told to anticipate. I spent about three months of that time in other parts of India than Delhi. I spent a month down in Madras and went on a tour with an American high school rock band through south India. It was really interesting and fun. I went to Jaipur and Jodhpur and gave lectures on American literature and life.

Q: How did you find the Indian reception of what we were having to say? The Vietnam War was at its apogee at this point.

WILLIAMS: Yes. And there was a fair amount of criticism about that. But audiences were generally receptive and interested in America. They didn't rule out interacting with me. Given my age, I was the youngest member of the USIS mission and so I got a lot of questions. They were critical of American imperialism and involvement. But I didn't find it an environment that was particularly... It wasn't difficult to the point of being dangerous or anything like that. It was more a gentleman's disagreement. The thing that caused the biggest flap while I was there was a speech that the ambassador gave in which he made reference to India not being covered by the American nuclear umbrella, which led to bouts of outrage that I don't think he anticipated given the kind of neutral stance that the Indians had adopted. But I didn't have anything to do with that.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

WILLIAMS: Kenneth Keating. He had been a senator from New York. He was the ambassador the whole time I was there.

Q: I always think of an Indian audience as being rather disputatious, arguing. Did you find that your arguing skills were honed? Or did this come into play?

WILLIAMS: It did on occasion, but I found that it wasn't always that way. Sometimes they were passive. Then you didn't know how much they understood of what I said. The audiences that I had were mostly outside of Delhi in the smaller cities in the hinterlands. The racial situation in the United States generated more interest and engagement often than foreign policy. I think that's in part because of their caste system. They're coming at it from a caste mentality and we're coming at it from a class/racial... But we're all talking about color. So, there was always this effort to get on the same wavelength.

Q: How did you handle this? Could one sort of say, "Well, you've got the same problem we have and we're working on it and you're not?"

WILLIAMS: I would never say they're not. One time, a guy criticized me for talking about the racial situation in the U.S. He got up and said, "You're American and you come here and you talk to us about the racial problems of the black people in America. But you're white." Obviously, it was strictly a color thing in his mind. I said, "No, I'm not white. I'm black." The house came down. But the only thing we could do is... I wasn't really there to try to get them to change their system but to make them understand how ours worked. To the extent that they found what we were trying to do and their understanding of it was distorted and they were basing their criticism on lack of understanding of what it's really like and what we were trying to do about it at the time. As far as their caste system, you can make the point about fairness and all people in every society should be treated equally but I wasn't going to harangue them on their caste system specifically.

Q: How did you feel after your year in Delhi? Was this a good career?

WILLIAMS: I was still in the holding mode on that. I began to enjoy Delhi after I had been there about six months. I was used to it and started to enjoy it a little bit more when I realized that you really can survive in this environment and do all kinds of intriguing things.

Q: One year is a pretty short time. It strikes me as being a little too short to plunk you in and then yank you out again.

WILLIAMS: Yes. But it was only a training assignment. They had a vacancy for a regular job... They didn't have any for me to go into in Delhi. So, I was sent to Karachi after that.

Q: When did you go to Karachi?

WILLIAMS: Summer of 1970.

Q: And you were there until when?

WILLIAMS: Until summer of '71.

Q: Again a year.

WILLIAMS: Yes. But that was at my own request.

Q: What was Karachi like?

WILLIAMS: Before I got there, someone described it as the largest village in the world. At the time, it was about three million people. It just seemed very quiet. Being an Islamic country, it seemed much more drab. The city had been relatively small until partition and then suddenly all these refugees came in. And they still had people living in refugee communities 20 years after partition. It didn't have a lot in the way of amenities outside your home. There was the SIMD, which was an old British style club that had Pakistani members as well. Vietnam was still going hot, so that was always a big issue. I started out as the assistant press officer and then became the director of the American center after three months. It was a time when USIA had a lot of money and you were encouraged to do whatever you could dream up. We did some interesting things. There used to be ship visits, U.S. Navy ships. They would bring in films and then we would organize film showings for the community using those films. Finding speakers. We did exhibits. We did a book fair every year. It was an environment where you could do a lot of different things. The security issue wasn't there yet.

Q: Today, there is strong hardline Muslim fundamentalism, which is essentially anti-American.

WILLIAMS: Yes. In those days, the Muslim fundamentalism was there but it was considered more on the fringes. You would hear of an incident maybe involving a foreign tourist every now and then, maybe twice in the year that I was there, but it was usually something involving modesty. The American women when they went out dressed modestly. They wouldn't wear the burqa covering everything. But it was definitely a more conservative society than New Delhi. But they had places that were supposedly westernized, a couple of clubs that would bring in Filipino performers, bands, that type of thing.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

WILLIAMS: I don't remember. Being in Karachi, I was in the consulate. Our consul general was Hobart Luppi.

Q: Were you married at the time?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: Where did you meet Brenda, your wife?

WILLIAMS: I had met Brenda when I was a summer intern the first time in 1966 in Washington.

Q: She was a Washington girl?

WILLIAMS: Yes, she was born and raised in DC. Actually, she was born in Illinois, but she moved to Washington when she was very young. We got married in '69 just before I went overseas.

Q: How did she cotton to the Foreign Service?

WILLIAMS: She liked it. She enjoyed it. Particularly to start out in India, you've got a house full of servants. She liked it. She enjoyed the social life with the wives. Of course, it was very different in those days with the hierarchy of wives and so forth. She enjoyed it. She didn't seem to chafe as much as some at the restrictions on us in Pakistan. There was a very rich social life within the foreign community, so in terms of nationalities it was a much richer group.

Q: Did you find that as you were working for USIA, was there an effort to key programs to a Muslim society?

WILLIAMS: No. There wasn't that dimension. The focus was on the issue. I don't know if they were so carefully thought out in Washington, but I don't recall any bad experiences with any of the materials that we got or the way the speakers presented themselves. It may have been just that we instinctively or unconsciously didn't do certain things without discussing them. I don't recall ever having a discussion saying, "Well, how are we going to pitch this particular issue?" In retrospect, I remember what we were doing. We were pitching American culture; there was no Islamic dimension to that. We never talked about a community of Islam in the United States, at least that year that I was there. We were dealing with international issues which... I don't recall the Middle East being discussed.

Q: This was not long after the Six Day War.

WILLIAMS: I don't recall that there was an outcry there.

Q: I don't think it had become that much of an issue as it became later.

WILLIAMS: What was going on when I was there that took up a lot of the Pakistani's attention was the problems they were having in maintaining east Pakistan as a part of the Pakistani state. The war broke out in December of '71.

Q: Just after you had left.

WILLIAMS: Right. But the effort to suppress the independence movement in east Pakistan had started before then. So, in that spring and summer of '71, the Americans from the consulate in east Pakistan were evacuated to Tehran. For them, that was the big focus. But I just don't recall the Mid East being part of our dialogue with the Pakistani people.

Q: Did you get any feel for the tensions between our people in India and our people in Pakistan, localitis?

WILLIAMS: No, not really. at least in USIA, the people tended to rotate between posts. The senior guys were pretty much of the background where they had a number of posts in both countries. Languages, except for reading them, the spoken languages in Lahore and Delhi are very similar. Urdu is kind of the lingua franca all over Pakistan and it was very similar to Hindi. So, I didn't sense any... Maybe at the policy level in the embassy, but I don't recall that being an issue.

Q: You left there only after a year. Why was that?

WILLIAMS: Because I didn't like it. I asked to transfer. I felt disappointed in having been sent to Karachi. I had been told I was getting another assignment and then I didn't get it, so I kind of got there with a bad taste in my mouth. It was very different. One of the directors of USIA, the regional director, came through and in talking, I let him know I was very unhappy and wanted out. He was kind enough to say, "Well, if you'll stay a year, I'll see what I can do." It was a very different personnel system in those days. After a year, I left.

Q: You went to Athens?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: You were in Athens from when to when?

WILLIAMS: '71 to '75.

Q: A real solid assignment.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: Was Greece on your list or was it just a different place?

WILLIAMS: It wasn't on my list. I just wanted out. There were no lists in those days. Personnel had a list, but nobody ever knew what was on it unless they called you. It was fortuitous and again reflective of how the personnel system worked in those days. What had happened was, the guy that I worked for as a summer intern in '66 was already in Athens as a cultural affairs officer.

Q: Who was that?

WILLIAMS: Theodore Wertine. He was back in Washington because his assistant cultural affairs officer was going to be leaving in a year's time and he was looking for someone. Personnel said, "Well, all we've got is this malcontent in Karachi named Leonardo Williams" and he was kind enough to say that he would like me to come and work for him. So, Personnel made that work.

Q: What was the situation in Athens?

WILLIAMS: As you recall, the Greeks who were opposed to the junta held us responsible, first of all, for getting it in and then certainly sustaining it once it was in. So, everything that we had to say to them had that as a backdrop. Those were the people that we wanted most to talk to because they were the most negative toward us. That affected everything. We were very sensitive to what might draw the ire of the foreign ministry and that type of thing in terms of our program and yet try to come up with programming that would be meaningful to the audiences we wanted to address.

Q: The dictatorship of the colonels was not an intellectual one to say the least. It was really a turning back of the times to a more fundamentalist nature, which made it very uncomfortable for most Americans there.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: I guess the people you were after, which would be the youth and the intellectuals, were just the ones who were opposed to the colonels.

WILLIAMS: Yes, definitely.

Q: How did you all deal with that?

WILLIAMS: We just tried to come up with activities that we felt would engage them but wouldn't necessarily be provocative to the authorities and tried to make our case in that context, that we were an open society, that we supported democracy, and that we valued Greece as a partner in this community of nations, and tried to explain to them that we didn't necessarily approve of everything... We didn't show specifically in Greece but by showing things we do support indicated that we were a reliable partner and one that would support democracy. They didn't have a lot in the way of specifics either in terms of their complaints other than the junta was there and that the United States should decide it should go away. We pointed out that we weren't in the business of bringing down governments, that this was a legitimate government that we had recognized, and any changes would have to be brought about by the Greeks themselves.

Q: I noticed when I was there that I've never been in a place where the people, the Greeks, tended to blame somebody else for everything.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: It wasn't their fault. It was that somebody else did it to them.

WILLIAMS: Right.

Q: There was a feeling of persecution. Was there a problem of getting people to come, guest lecturers and all this? Greece was on the intellectual black list.

WILLIAMS: The speakers that would come out were recruited in Washington. I don't recall... Maybe there were some at the time who said, "I don't want to go there." But I don't recall that that ever came up in discussion.

Q: So you were getting people.

WILLIAMS: Yes. We got a writer, David Wagoner, that came out; and some guy from the New York Film School; Edward Keller; Daniel Borsten.

Q: It was the Nixon administration. They weren't going after the left-wing of the American intellectual community at that time anyway.

WILLIAMS: Right.

Q: What was your impression of the Greek intellectual community?

WILLIAMS: I knew that a lot of them were highly critical of U.S. policy. But I think most of them realized that Greece's future really lay with the West. Some of the leftist intellectuals kept their distance from the embassy. One we had invited to go to the U.S. and had turned us down a couple of times, a writer. But he eventually accepted. He was probably at that time the foremost... He was the one that eventually came the closest. He would at least come to our programs and acknowledge our existence and come to social events. He came to the States. I think it was an Iowa writers program. He came back and one of the things he said was, "You know this debate about U.S. and Soviet power? I went to New York and was in Chicago and looked around and they're toying with the Soviets." He had been to Russia too, and had been quoted by them.

Q: One of our big policy problems while you were there was the home porting of the American Sixth Fleet there. Was somebody saying, "Okay, fellows, go out there and sell our program?"

WILLIAMS: I don't think we did a single program on home porting at least in my bailiwick. I was an assistant cultural officer for two years. My focus was the cultural center. We had a big English teaching program and did exhibits of theater, lectures halls, etc. But I don't recall that that was one of the issues that we as a cultural... I think that was more a press issue for the information section. They were working with the military.

Q: Did you have an active English teaching program there?

WILLIAMS: Yes. The binational center was a joint U.S. government and Greek private institution. It was actually registered as a private institution, but the U.S. government funded it and helped staff it. We paid for the director and the assistant director. But it was expected to be basically self-supporting financially. It was down in the center of Athens in a six story building, prime real estate. The major source of income for the program was English teaching. During the time I was there, we had about 1,000 students. It was considered a prestige program. There were a number of other English teaching institutions in Athens. It was a big business. But ours, because we had only native speakers as teacher and it was affiliated with the American embassy, had quite a bit of prestige. One of the interesting sidelights of that operation was that the Greek government would count enrollment in the Hellenic-American Union and the Union's English teaching program as evidence if someone was a genuine student. We had a large percentage of our students were from the Mid East. They weren't just Greeks. They would come into Greece to do whatever, perhaps work, and then maybe go to university. But they would enroll in the American Union English teaching course so they could get their student visas.

Q: Did you find that we ever got into difficulty with the government? It was a very touchy government. There were religious problems and political problems. It was not a government that was taking it easy.

WILLIAMS: Right. We never got into any trouble with them that I can recall. Certainly during my tenure as director I know we didn't. There were a couple of times I wondered if we would because we showed a film one time that had music from Mikis Theodorakis. It was a film that we had gotten from Washington. It was called "Youth and Film," the program. We got like 50 short films. No one had noted that Theodorakis had done this.

Q: He was a left-wing musician of international fame.

WILLIAMS: Right. His music was banned in Greece at the time. I wasn't even there when we ran the film. I was down in my office. One of my colleagues who worked in the Hellenic American Union came running downstairs and said, "Did you know that there's music by Theodorakis in the film?" I said, "No." He said, "Yeah, the students are going wild up there." I thought, if anything, that would get us some attention. I don't know if no one noticed. But the government was always said to have informants around, so I can't imagine that they didn't know it. But by then it passed unnoticed, wasn't considered worthy of following up. But that was about the only time we ever did anything that might...

Q: Did you have a library connected to this?

WILLIAMS: Yes. It had been in the building but was eventually moved to a different site. But it was part of the USIS operation in Athens.

Q: Was this part of your responsibility?

WILLIAMS: No. The library was under the regional librarian, and she reported directly to the cultural affairs officer.

Q: You didn't have to worry about the books and all that.

WILLIAMS: No. We were their landlord for a while, but they needed more space, so they moved out and we converted that space to English teaching. Everything was converted to English teaching.

Q: Where did you get your teachers?

WILLIAMS: They were a mix of Greeks who were either born in the States or had lived in the States a long time to the point where they were bilingual, or Americans who were Greek-American, born there. And then there were other Americans who were passing through and wanted a job for the summer or a year or whatever. It was a pretty eclectic mixture.

Q: How did you find the students? Were they pretty serious?

WILLIAMS: I used to go and observe the classes on occasion. The ones who wanted to... The ones who came to class... They said some students enrolled just to be able to show proof of enrollment in an educational institution.

Q: These are usually Middle Easterners or something like that.

WILLIAMS: Yes, as a group, that was the largest group. But the people who attended there, because they were paying a premium for going to our school - we weren't the cheapest in town - generally tended to be serious.

Q: There was a coup against the colonels in 1973. During '74, there was an ill-fated, as far as the coup makers were concerned, on Cyprus and brought about democracy. Did these things have any effect on you all?

WILLIAMS: The one in '73 where the military turned on itself and threw out Papadopoulos, I was out of the country. I had gone on home leave. But coming back, it didn't seem to affect our operation. Our audiences were still pretty much the same. We still considered the same sensitivities to be in place that had been there before. I don't recall that it made a particularly remarkable difference. Our enrollment stayed the same. That was prominent Greeks and on the American side mostly businessmen.

Then in '74 with the coup attempt in Cyprus, the fact that it led to the downfall of the junta diminished the issue of our support for the junta at the time. The Greek people's anti-junta's energies became more focused on reestablishing democracy, cultivating it, warding off fears that the junta was going to stage a comeback afterwards. There was always an ongoing undercurrent of critical reporting in the press about the U.S. role behind the scenes, but as an issue that dominated our discussions in my line of work, it receded quite a bit.

Q: Did the November 17th suppression of a student demonstration in '73 that later became quite a rallying point for particularly the left-wing have much of an effect on you?

WILLIAMS: No, not in the time that I was there. I don't even recall that there was any movement until after the assassinations started. One of the concerns in those years before the fall of the junta was the bombings that were carried out against Americans. I recall being wakened up in the middle of the night because I left my car door open and the security police in doing their patrols and checks had found it and wanted me to come out and lock it. So, there was that security. But the most tension I ever felt was during the Arab-Israeli war in '73. There was, aside from what was going on in our bilateral relationship with the Greeks, Athens was one of the areas of conflict for the Arabs and Israelis. There were an ongoing series of incidents during the time that I was there. That did cause... Because of the number of Middle Eastern students that we had, we felt a fair amount of tension from that. But November 17th didn't really coalesce until after I had gone.

Q: How about the communists? One always thinks of Lina Melkuri and the Paraist left-wing groups. Were you at all a center for demonstrations?

WILLIAMS: Not the Hellenic-American Union. The demonstrations tended to be directed toward the embassy. Although we were downtown, which was closest to the university, we weren't really targeted. We occasionally got bomb threats, but we were never really sure if they were from the Greeks or from other elements that wanted to intimidate us. The most visible symbol.

Q: Did you ever run across a problem with Greek parents trying to work on grades and that sort of thing? Greeks can be pretty heavy on trying to make sure their kids get the best marks and that sort of thing.

WILLIAMS: No, never had a disgruntled student trying to raise a grade. They just worked on the teachers. There was a layer of authority.

Q: How did you find the board worked, prominent Greeks and prominent Americans? Did you have problems during these difficult times?

WILLIAMS: No. Probably after '74, the board's influence base diminished, changed. I was director of the Binational Center from '73 to '75. In those first two years that I was in Athens, first observing what was going on up there, the board members were very well connected politically. When any issue came up, usually related to our personnel policies or our funding practices, the board was able to head off any parliamentary debate. After that, we lost some of those partners, wherever they were. But at the same time, we were under a lot less pressure because of other events in the country. Internally, it seemed to work rather well. First of all, these were all very busy people. This may account for our lack of friction with the government, since they had some say in our programming or at least they had an interest in it. We would share our programs with them in advance and they would be aware of anything that they felt might be sensitive for the most part. But I don't recall having any strife. The real problems for the board was a teacher's strike while I was there. That was probably the most traumatic thing that happened.

Q: Did you settle that one?

WILLIAMS: Yes. That was an interesting experience. That was my real introduction to cultural differences. They wanted a pay raise and felt that there was more money being hidden in the bookkeeping of the Hellenic-American Union. So, they were convinced that we could afford that and that even, if necessary, the U.S. government could step in to end the strike to save itself from embarrassment. The fact was that the money wasn't there. The board did everything possible to make our finances as transparent to the point where we posted the monthly budget in the teachers room for them to see. But they were just absolutely convinced that transparency was not to be believed. It came to my attention that they were concerned that we were going to sell off our English teaching operation, contract it out to a Greek organization, Pierce College, an American college in Athens. So, after hours of meeting with the teachers, I finally decided, "If they don't believe what's in front of them, then the only thing they'll believe is what's hidden and I'll hide something." So, I had my secretary call Pierce College and make an appointment with the guy who was the head of their academic programs. I went up there and talked to him about the possibility of taking over the contract for the English teaching at the Hellenic-American Union. He said, "Oh, yes, that's very interesting." I said, "But please don't share this information with anyone because it's not a done deal." I actually had no intention of turning over the program. I went back to my office and within half an hour, there was a delegation of teachers there asking me if it was true that I was going to turn the English teaching program over to Pierce College and I said, "Of course not." But they didn't believe me, so they broke the strike. In that context, being completely open about it was not the way to communicate.

Q: So many countries really much prefer conspiracies.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: The Greeks always thought that President Nixon stayed up at night thinking what he could do to the Greeks.

WILLIAMS: There is kind of an ethnocentrism there, too, that "we are so important."

Q: This is a good place to stop for today. We'll pick this up again in 1975. Where did you go?

WILLIAMS: I came back to Washington to go into Czech language training.

Q: Today is January 16, 2003. Was Czech something that you had picked?

WILLIAMS: This assignment came about by chance. During the time I was in Athens, I had expressed an interest in serving in Eastern Europe. In those days, at least in USIA, it was considered an important career development move to spend at least some time in the Eastern Bloc. Also, I was interested in the region and curious about it. The personnel system came up with this assignment.

Q: How long did you take Czech?

WILLIAMS: I took it for the full 44 weeks.

Q: How did you find Czech?

WILLIAMS: Extremely difficult. It was a different language structure from any language I had ever studied before.

Q: Sometimes from your teachers, you can pick up quite a bit about the culture. Were you getting that from them?

WILLIAMS: Yes, definitely. That was part of the goal of the training, to give us some sense of the cultural environment that we'd be working in. Yes, that was very much a part of our everyday interaction.

Q: So you went out in the summer of '76?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: Where did you go? We only had Prague then, didn't we?

WILLIAMS: Actually, in Czechoslovakia, we had Prague and Bratislava. I was in Prague. At that time, Bratislava was a consulate and it had been closed down. There was some diplomatic conflict.

Q: You were there from the summer of '76 until when?

WILLIAMS: Until the summer of '79.

Q: Were you there for the bicentennial?

WILLIAMS: That would have been '76. I got there in August, so there weren't any special activities.

Q: What was your job?

WILLIAMS: I was the assistant public affairs officer in the Press and Cultural Affairs Section. USIA at that time had two officers there, the PAO and the assistant PAO, and then a small staff of Foreign Service nationals, about eight or nine.

Q: In '76, what was the status of Czech-American relations?

WILLIAMS: It was pretty frosty. In the years leading up to that period, we had been trying to negotiate an exchange agreement. That was the nature of the relationship in the education and cultural sphere with the soviet Bloc countries. In order to have anything like a normal program, you had to have some kind of an agreement where it was spelled out legally what the obligations of the parties were. We were negotiating this document when I arrived there. I got this briefing saying someone suggested it might be signed in the next few weeks. When I left in '79, it still hadn't been signed. So, they were rather frosty.

Q: How would you describe the Czech government and the situation in Czechoslovakia?

WILLIAMS: At that time, it was one if not the most orthodox of the communist governments. It was very conservative, followed the Soviet lead very closely so that when things tended to get tough between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. They got tough on the Czech Republic, too, and probably to a stricter degree than some of the other countries. At that time, Bulgaria had the reputation for being the most orthodox and the most Slavish of the Bloc countries, besides the SU. But we used to say that with the Bulgarians, they do everything the Soviets do, but the Czechs try to anticipate what the Soviets are going to do. That was the sense of it.

Q: Who was our ambassador there?

WILLIAMS: When I got there, it was Thomas Byrne. When he left, Frank (Francis) Meehan came. Byrne was a political appointee who had come out of the labor union, had strong ties within the Democratic Party. Frank Meehan was a career Foreign Service officer.

Q: With Byrne, what was your sense of how he operated? I would think somebody coming out of the labor movement in a tight orthodox communist state would feel very uncomfortable with nowhere to go.

WILLIAMS: By the time I got there, he had been there a while and had reached some kind of equilibrium in how to deal with the situation. It was always difficult dealing with the Czech government and everything was always very formal. There didn't seem to be a lot of room for the kind of latitude one gets when you have good personal relations with the officialdom.

Q: Who was your public affairs officer [PAO]?

WILLIAMS: That was Fred Quinn.

Q: What did you do?

WILLIAMS: Tried hard. That was a lot of what we did. Our program consisted of doing some distribution of materials like the wireless file to a limited number of people, mostly in the government. We had a small library that would accept walk-in clientele, we still had a good flow of people coming in given the circumstances, but often they would be stopped on the street and IDs checked going in or their bags looked into coming out to see what they had. We had a tiny Fulbright program which brought two American lecturers to Czechoslovakia every year. One was at Charles University in American literature. We had someone in Bratislava who was a teacher of English as a second language. We tried to get the International Visitor Program, the IV Program, but I can't recall that we were successful in getting anyone. Maybe toward the end of my stay we got a couple people to go to the United States under that program. We brought in performers. The biggest thing we did there was, the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra came in the fall of '76. Johnny Cash was there. We brought another group called the Jubilee Singers. Then we had some smaller solo artists come in. Igor Kipnis, who was at that time considered one of the world's great harpsichordists, was there but performed only in the living room of the PAO to a small invited audience there.

Milos Forman came back for the first time. He was a famous Czech movie director who left Czechoslovakia after '68 because of the Soviet invasion and the aftermath. After that invasion, there was a relatively calm period but then there was a major purging of the Party subsequently and, in addition to that, more pressure on the intellectuals and withdrawal or clamping down on intellectual freedom. So, a lot of prominent Czech artists, intellectuals, left the country. Forman was among them. His films were banned. But it was a movie production of "Hair" around that time that came up. There was a loosening up of some of the restrictions at least to the point where Forman was able to come back and introduce the film and do the premier in the Czech Republic. We had an event for him at the public affairs officer's residence. So there were these kinds of activities going on.

A lot of what we did was just personal contact trying to stay in touch with the community on a personal basis and maintain some kind of relationship with officialdom at the Ministry of Education as well.

Q: With officials, was there much interplay or by this time were they all pretty much apparatchiks?

WILLIAMS: They were pretty much apparatchiks; formally in terms of interacting with the government. At one point, they even wanted us to have all contacts outside the foreign ministry cleared by the foreign ministry. Before you went and made an office call, for instance, to discuss a grant or something like that. We just didn't do it. We kind of ignored the directive and things worked out. But in terms of... Every now and then after you had been working with someone over time, they would move off the official line or at least would not be as uptight about dealing with you and would show a little individualism. But mostly it was very formal.

Q: Was there any travel to the United States? Were you able to get leader grants or anything like this?

WILLIAMS: No, other than toward the end when we had our first IV grants. And that involved a couple of choreographers. It was in the cultural and arts field that we were able to have any kind of ongoing interaction.

Q: One always thinks of Czechoslovakia as having some of the oldest universities in Europe. Was there much intellectual life that we could tap into?

WILLIAMS: I'm sure there was a lot of intellectual life going on. The thing was that we were circumscribed in what we could actually do in terms of working with universities. It took forever to set up a program, in part because university administrations were so cautious. I'm sure they had their guidelines for dealing with foreigners and Americans were a particular breed of foreigner that required a certain amount of bureaucratic courage to start with because you opened yourself up to criticism for working with Americans. It was a little bit easier at those universities where we had Fulbrighters because they had already been accepted and were permitted to have some contact with foreigners within certain prescribed limits. So, it tended to be through those classes that were taught by Americans or colleagues of the Americans who felt comfortable doing that. There was not widespread access.

Q: What about publications and things like this?

WILLIAMS: Our primary publication was the magazine "Forum," a magazine that was put together in Washington and contained selected articles from a broad array of American publications. It was directed at the intellectual student, professor, independent intellectual, the better educated. I don't remember the number that we distributed, but we were never sure that they got to the people to whom we sent them.

Q: When you were looking at groups, did you have to have programs designed for the Czechs and programs designed for the Slovaks?

WILLIAMS: No, we were glad to get any program we could. There were obvious differences between the republics, but that didn't extend so much to our program. Our program tended to be more designed for Czechoslovakia for a more general audience, although we did see how the audiences could differ from locale to locale and how they responded to some of the programs. The emphasis that we had on the arts, particularly the performing arts, that tended to be a universal language.

Q: Was there any influence from the Czechoslovaks who had left long before and also after '68 and gone to the United States? Were they exerting pressure or influence?

WILLIAMS: No, I think that was felt more in Washington and in the discussions within the Department between the Administration and Congress. In terms of what we were doing on a daily basis, I don't recall any particular issues, not for us in public affairs. I went to a lot of the country team meetings and the other internal meetings, but I don't recall any instances where that was a major issue, although I'm sure that in the discussions with the Department, some of that filtered back to the embassy.

Q: The Carter Administration came in shortly after you arrived. You arrived in August of '76 and by January of '77, the Carter Administration came in. They were making a real effort to open a new face to the East. If we're more open and more friendly or something like that. Did you feel this change?

WILLIAMS: No. What happened was, it was in the winter of '77 that the Charter of '77 was issued by the Czech intellectual community. So they really clamped down. They were going in one direction, whatever hand may have been extended. They were turning inward to deal with what they felt was a threat to the regime.

Q: Could you explain what this charter was and the group that was sponsoring it and how we dealt with it or felt about it?

WILLIAMS: Yes. It was a group of Czech intellectuals who decided to challenge the Czech government to implement the constitution. They publicly signed it. They had the names. The government's reaction was to begin to harass them. Some of them were jailed. One of the tactics they used was to allow someone an exit visa to go out of the country for some professional reason. Vaclav Havel, for instance, a playwright, was allowed to go to Vienna to either direct or attend a premier of one of his works and his passport was revoked. At times, people were afraid even to accept the chance to go abroad to do some professional activity. One of the tactics then was to use it as an occasion to lift their passport. Havel was put in jail and others were jailed around that time as well.

We were strongly in favor of the liberalization and the establishment and growth of democracy in Czechoslovakia. But on the other hand, we were not active sponsors of the movement. It was an indigenous Czech movement. I know there were contacts between people in the embassy and the people who were involved in the Charter of '77. But it was more informational than anything else. They wanted us to know what they were doing. Morally, we were in favor of more freedom in Czechoslovakia but it was up to the Czechs to do that themselves.

Q: The Carter Administration put the first major emphasis on human rights. Did that translate into anything we were doing in Czechoslovakia?

WILLIAMS: I'm sure it was part of the dialogue, but I'm sure it was part of the dialogue before the Carter Administration's emphasis on it. I don't remember any particular programming that would have addressed that specifically. It was always part of our discussions, part of material we were disseminating there. It was always an element of the broader message that we were trying to deliver there.

Q: Was civil rights still a theme that we were playing in Czechoslovakia?

WILLIAMS: Civil rights in the U.S.?

Q: Yes.

WILLIAMS: It was again part of our general presentation of the benefits of an open and democratic society. Some of the people that we brought there were minorities, but I don't remember if they ever specifically talked about civil rights in the United States. We had Judith Jamison, for instance, as an example of what an open society can achieve in terms of diversity.

Q: Were there minority problems in Czechoslovakia?

WILLIAMS: Yes, but they weren't as evident as they became later, at least not to us. Their big problem was the Romani population, the gypsies. The Czechs never talked about it much, if at all. I remember being down in southern Bohemia in Český Krumlov, and there were all these dark skinned people. I asked one of the people in the foreign ministry and he got a little bit defensive about it. You saw a few in Prague. After I started asking, I began to hear about what some of the issues were.

Q: In Yugoslavia, it was a significant drifting population. It remains a problem.

WILLIAMS: Yes. There were problems with the foreign minority community. There were a number of Africans there either as foreign students or they were already second generation living in Czechoslovakia. But most were foreign students. Some had married Czech women. There were a couple of incidents, at least one murder, and there were instances of harassment and that type of thing that was severe enough that they came to public attention.

Q: Did you feel the Soviet influence there?

WILLIAMS: Yes, you saw it - soldiers on the streets on leave. By that time, they were no longer garrisoning the city the way they had immediately after the Revolution. There was a big base there. You'd see them in town walking around in groups.

Q: In your work, did you find yourself in competition with the Soviets or did the Soviets pretty well run the show?

WILLIAMS: They had a dominant position in terms of what they could do. There was a Russia house, for instance, that was a big cultural center right down in the center of Prague. We had a good collegial relationship. We were foreign diplomats and they would invite us over to the Russia house for lunch and we'd talk and debate. But they had a larger presence. They had more money. They tended to be a longer term presence. Their officers generally had more time in the country than ours, etc.

Q: Was there much East German influence there?

WILLIAMS: That wasn't so obvious. The dominant presence were the Soviets. I don't recall anything specifically about them. One of the things that we noted was that we had a lot of Germans that came into the American Center and our little library there, which was down the street from the West German embassy. It seemed to be tourist types, they were in town and now they could go to the American library, where otherwise they might not have been able to in their hometowns.

Q: What about the press?

WILLIAMS: It was unrelentingly anti-American by every measure. There were three newspapers, "Pravda" being the major one. That was the Communist Party organ. It was hard to find any real news. International news was all slanted toward communism and against the western democracies. We would read them, but you really had to be sifting with a very fine sieve to find anything interesting.

Q: The decline of Soviet prose is not something to be mourned.

WILLIAMS: Yes. And it was totally state controlled. We would go and call on the editors at different places and there would be debating of issues but we would never see the results.

Q: Czechoslovakia being sort of stuck into Austria, was there much knowledge of what was going on, things from the BBC, the Voice of America? Was there an undercurrent of people being pretty well up to date on what was happening?

WILLIAMS: People listened to outside broadcasts, so they knew what the major issues were. They didn't always see the finer points of it or have a finer understanding of society. There is a tendency to idealize the western countries and life. VOA was sometimes tough to receive.

Q: It was jammed?

WILLIAMS: Yes, they jammed it at times. Some of the frequencies that they didn't bother to jam were just difficult to hear. Nothing was easy for them. The Czechs have this talent... The information collection internal security services have that knack for creating a sense of omnipresence.

Q: Yes. The Czechs were often the most efficient exporter of nasty police work in the undeveloped world. If you brought in your Czech security people, they could turn out a pretty nasty piece of work in Central Africa or something like that.

WILLIAMS: Yes. That wasn't part of my experience there. I never saw that. But I did see how they could create a sense of insecurity on the part of everyone so that people never really were sure that the police weren't watching. And they couldn't possibly have been everywhere all the time. But they managed to create that illusion.

Q: Did anyone at the embassy have any problems such as provocations, attempts to suborn you or seduce you?

WILLIAMS: Not that I'm aware of. We used to joke about the fact that we were always getting these security briefings about sexual entrapment but nobody ever tried it. I had one funny experience that was pretty clumsy. A fellow came to my office and said he was a student and was interested in going to the U.S. to study. So, I explained to him what he needed to do and also pointed out to him that his government- (end of tape)

I explained the process for applying to American universities but also pointed out to him that his government hadn't looked with favor on students going to the U.S. to study. In fact, I didn't know of any who had managed to accomplish that. This chat went on for about half an hour. Then he pulled out a picture of a young lady in a rather provocative pose and put it on my desk. I said, "Does she want to go to the States, too?" He said, "No, no. This is my girlfriend. I can arrange for you to meet her." I said, "Well, thank you, but I'm happily married. I'm not really interested" and so forth. And then he looked a little bit embarrassed and said, "Okay, sorry. It's my job." He walked out. That was as close to anything like that that I saw.

Q: Did you always travel in pairs?

WILLIAMS: No, that wasn't a requirement. I made a number of trips by myself down to Bratislava primarily just to stay in contact and discussing cultural exchanges and orientation, that type of thing. At least in the time I was there, that wasn't a requirement.

Q: You left there when in '79?

WILLIAMS: July of '79.

Q: Then where?

WILLIAMS: I came back to the United States and was assigned to Personnel. I was a personnel officer for Europe in USIA.

Q: How long did you do that?

WILLIAMS: I did that for two years. Then I did a year of academic training, Soviet and Eastern European studies at Georgetown. Then I went into Slovene language training in preparation for my assignment to Ljubljana, Yugoslavia.

Q: In Personnel, was Europe sort of the place everybody wanted to go?

WILLIAMS: It was an interesting time to be in Personnel at USIA because John Reinhardt was the director at that time and one of the innovations that they did was to try to break up the old geographic "clubs" to get more diversity of assignment in terms of regions because they found that people who started out in Europe tended to stay in Europe, people who went to Africa tended to stay in Africa, etc. So, they established something called "open assignments" where all the jobs were announced openly. There was a fierce effort made to enforce that. So, what was happening was that during the time I was there they were trying to force people out of Europe to make way for people coming in from Africa and some of the other less desirable posts. It was like having a front row seat at a massive bureaucratic struggle because the regional offices resisted that vitally. There was a certain shift and we were bringing more people in from other regions.

Q: How did you find... Did you discover where the power was or different power centers in the geographic bureaus?

WILLIAMS: Yes. They had it and were anxious not to give it up. It was only the director's commitment to the open assignments process. It was my job to go to the bureaus and convince them that someone who had never served in the region and was a mid-level officer and was going into what they considered a sensitive job was definitely the right guy for that job. FS Personnel was in the ascendancy. It was able to make a lot of those assignments stick. And a lot of them came unglued once the people got out there. It might be true on the State side true that one of the things that emerged in that time was that that kind of shift in staffing in terms of area expertise resulted in some morale issues, too, not just a question of whether or not the person could do their job. Usually, people can learn to do that. If you're a FS officer, you can do that. But morale issues came up. The classic case was one in which a person served mostly in Third World countries and had gotten used to a certain lifestyle and certain pace and then was put into a major European capital where they lived 20 miles from where they worked, had to rely on public transportation, no servants, and much smaller quarters than they had been used to. That was an issue not just for the officer but for the families, too. That was something that hadn't been reckoned with that emerged pretty quickly as an issue. But we soldiered on. By the time USIA came to a close, it had reached a happy medium. The regional offices did get more say eventually in assignments.

Q: In '81, you went to Georgetown for a year?

WILLIAMS: Right.

Q: '81-'82?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: What were your studies?

WILLIAMS: It was a mid-career academic year. I focused on Eastern European studies. I took some courses in Eastern European history and politics and also in Soviet politics, history, and literature. For variety's sake, I took a survey course in Mid East history for those two semesters.

Q: How did you find the academic atmosphere at Georgetown?

WILLIAMS: I didn't find it particularly unusual. It was what I would have expected. It certainly wasn't as tumultuous as it was at the University of Wisconsin. I tended to drop into the classes and the library and then I would go back home, so I wasn't involved in campus life at all. It was very refreshing. At times, the work was harder than my FS work.

Q: Dealing particularly with the Soviet side, did you find that anyone was saying that this was a system that was on its last legs?

WILLIAMS: Not in '82. The debate was going on whether about how long it could last, but nobody foresaw it collapsing any time soon. We were studying the Soviet Union like it was going to be there forever in some form or fashion. We might talk about evolution, but not collapse.

Q: Had you been assigned already to go to Yugoslavia?

WILLIAMS: I was assigned during that year.

Q: And then you took Slovenian.

WILLIAMS: Yes, a language of two million people.

Q: You were going to Ljubljana. Were you picking up the difference between Slovenian, Croatian, and Serbian?

WILLIAMS: No, I had enough trouble just learning Slovenian. But for native speakers, they see the relationships very quickly. Other than when I went down to Belgrade, I never had extensive exposure to it. I never watched Serbo-Croatian television. I was focused on trying to learn Slovene. But my sense was from listening to other people and how easily they went back and forth that there were a lot of cognates and it probably would be fairly easy to learn Serbo-Croatian once you knew Slovene. I think Serbo-Croatian is probably closer to Bulgarian. It's disputed if that's even a separate language.

Q: You went to Slovenia and were there from when to when?

WILLIAMS: I was in Slovene training... from the summer of '83 until December of '86, so three and a half years.

Q: What was the situation in Slovenia when you got there?

WILLIAMS: Slovenia was the most prosperous of the Yugoslav republics. It seemed to be very open. One difference in Serbia is that the Serbs were more outgoing and there was a certain amount of energy there that resembled the Greeks in a lot of ways in terms of their volatility and so forth. The Slovenes tended to be more Germanic and seemed to feel that their natural orientation was toward Bavaria and saw themselves more as an Austrian influenced entity. I remember one time, this university rector was meeting with the cultural affairs officer from Belgrade. He was describing the Slovenes. He said, "Slovenes are really Hapsburgians in the Balkan manner." I thought that was a good way of summing it up. That played out in what you saw. It was more liberal, more open. It was still communist and the Communists were in charge. But they thought themselves to have very much their own identity and a different approach to Yugoslav communism and self-management. They were interested in closer ties with the West than they had had before. There was a lot of movement back and forth across the border, which intersects a Slovene region. Trieste was a Slovene city originally and they still speak Slovene around there as well.

Q: What about Italy? What were the relations with Italy?

WILLIAMS: In general, they were good. The Yugoslavs used to go to Italy all the time to shop, especially in Trieste and the area around there. They seemed to be able to go there rather freely if they could afford it. There was some kind of a monetary limitation at one point. I don't remember the details of that. But cross-border movement seemed to be...

Q: When you were there, although Slovenia was part of communist Yugoslavia, was this a different breed of cat from Czechoslovakia that you had known?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes, definitely. Czechoslovakia was still very much on the Stalinist model. Yugoslavia reflected a lot of different flavors, but the overall posture of the society was more open.

Q: Was Tito still there?

WILLIAMS: No, he had died. It had gone to the collective presidency, the rotating presidency, by that point. And of course the big question was whether or not that would work in the long run.

Q: What were you doing there?

WILLIAMS: I was the branch public affairs officer. That was my USIA title. My Czech title was "director of the American Center." We had a small facility there, a library and offices. We were doing the normal things that USIA does, but more easily than we could do in Czechoslovakia. We had a strong international visitors program. We organized film showings and lectures at the American Center and at Yugoslav institutions around the republic. Operate the library, of course. I did a lot of personal contact work. We were sought after as-

Q: You were the American contact, weren't you?

WILLIAMS: Yes, I was the only American official in the Slovene Republic.

Q: Did you find yourself doing diplomatic work, too?

WILLIAMS: To some extent. I wasn't doing political or economic reporting or anything like that. But when there were official events that they wanted an American presence at and it wasn't at a level that would bring in the consul general, who was in Zagreb, or someone from Belgrade, I would be the official American representing the embassy.

In terms of my daily work, it was virtually all with the press and cultural institutions and economic institutions. In trying to promote economic liberalization, we worked with groups like the Chamber of Commerce and some of the economic departments in the Slovene government. They were anxious to have that kind of collaboration. Once the groundwork had been laid by whatever, Party approvals had to come out of that. But the Party members per se, those people that were officials of the Party, generally kept their distance. It was pretty much in the last year that I was there that things had evolved in our relationship with the Yugoslavs. They became more forthcoming and more willing to attend our events and actively worked with us.

Q: Who was our ambassador?

WILLIAMS: David Anderson was the ambassador when I got there. He was followed by John Scanlan, a State Department career officer who had been a Fulbright professor there and knew the country real well.

Q: There was quite a Yugoslav mafia within the Foreign Service, both USIA and State, wasn't there?

WILLIAMS: It was a place people went back to, yes. Larry Eagleburger was a junior officer there.

Q: He and I and David Anderson took Serbian together. It's a place people went back to and they really knew the country quite well.

WILLIAMS: Yes. That was one of the things that was a strong benefit. When they came back as ambassador or at other high level jobs, they were able to step right in there. It kept the relationship at a certain level that would have been difficult had they not had that background.

Q: How did you find your contacts with the university?

WILLIAMS: They were good. In fact, I still have friends there and we still communicate. There were certain professors at the university who spoke good English to start with and had had a lot of interaction with western institutions and they were very open and receptive. The Department of Social Sciences was one of those. The philosophical faculty was another group that we worked with quite a bit. We had good relations with the law school, and the university administration in general. Ljubljana at that time said it was a town of about 300,000. But in terms of those people that were leaders in the community, it was a relatively small community. One didn't just see people at the office. One saw them downtown at the market or the theater, etc. It was a very open society in that regard. It wasn't totally open. There were people who felt it was sensitive to their jobs and to their contacts.

Q: Was there much of a student flow going to the United States?

WILLIAMS: Not a lot. It increased during the time that I was there, not just because I was there. The numbers were increasing. It was a time when Slovenia was doing relatively well economically despite the complaints about transference of wealth to the south from the north that really became a big issue later when the economy wasn't doing quite as well. I'm not aware of a whole lot of students, but I know that there were some going, with full scholarships.

Q: Was it more a matter of finance than of political control?

WILLIAMS: Yes, definitely. It was finance and language skills. Those people who could get the money either through scholarships or because their families actually had enough money and they wanted to go were able to do so.

Q: Was English the major language that people were learning?

WILLIAMS: It was German and English. English in the time I was there had become the language of choice as a foreign language. But a lot of people still learned German because they were living in Germany's backyard and vice versa.

Q: Italian wasn't particularly...

WILLIAMS: Not in that area. Closer to the Italian border... In fact, if you go to places along the coast there, Coker, for instance, people speak Slovene with an Italian lilt. It's really curious. There were some border issues but those weren't front and center. They were kind of smoldering.

Q: Was Trieste at all an issue or something that the old people would sit around and bemoan that it no longer was theirs?

WILLIAMS: No, I think the Slovenes tend to be realistic about those type of things. The issue had more to do with workers working in one country and crossing the border, that type of thing. Rights issues, homeland issues. But I don't remember any complaints about it no longer being Slovene. One of the standing jokes was, "It's a good thing that we don't have Trieste. It's a good thing that the Italians got it and we don't have it. Otherwise, we wouldn't have any place to go to buy good shoes." That was their take.

Q: Was there a pretty strong sense of Slovenian nationality? I guess the only other nationality that the Slovenians were up against would be the Croatians?

WILLIAMS: Yes. During the time I was there, there wasn't that much competition between them. But you're right about Slovenes' sense of nationality. They've got Germans on one side and Croatians and Serbs on the other. They realize they need that strong sense of identity to keep from being swallowed. It's a small linguistic group there. They see themselves as ethnically different in terms of being more Germanic than Slavic in a lot of respects. It was definitely there. They did things to foster it. They had seminars every year on Slovenian culture and would bring people of Slovene descent or other foreigners. I was invited and participated in a couple of those to learn more about Slovene culture.

Q: Was there a strong, active Slovenian community in the U.S. that played any role?

WILLIAMS: Yes, they were definitely there. And they could go back and forth freely. You would frequently meet American Slovenes in Ljubljana for whatever business, some just visiting family, some to participate in some cultural event and so forth. I don't remember any big issues that the Slovene government may have felt defensive about. If anything, they tended to welcome folks and any kind of support they could get from overseas.

Q: Did you get any feeling that the Yugoslav government per se, mainly Serb, was looking with a certain amount of disfavor on Slovenia?

WILLIAMS: You'd hear echoes of it from the Slovenes. I didn't see it in going about my daily life or work. But Slovenes were very open about expressing unhappiness that what they saw was exploitation of them by the central government in the sense that they felt they were subsidizing the other less well off republics unfairly. They recognized a certain amount of national responsibility, but they felt that it went beyond them being responsible, that they were actually being exploited. They felt that the resources were being wasted, not just that they would have liked to have more money in their pocket but that what was being taken out of their pocket wasn't being well used.

Q: Was the West German embassy or branch active there? Or Austrian? Or the Soviets? Or were we the main game in town?

WILLIAMS: I'd like to think that we were the main game in town, but the Austrians were there. Theirs may have been a consulate. We didn't have a consulate. My official document said that I was a journalist. I had two passports, one that would reflect my journalistic status and then my diplomatic passport. The Austrians were the only other foreign country that had an actual establishment there. Oh, and also the French. There was a French cultural center.

Q: Were there any major visits, incidents, or problems, during this '83-'86 time?

WILLIAMS: No, not that I recall. I remember it being kind of an idyllic experience.

Q: Did any Americans get in trouble that you had to try to get out?

WILLIAMS: No. I think the toughest case of that kind we had was a guy who came to town and was going to restaurants and eating hearty meals and then said, "I don't want to pay!" They would lock him up and we would be contacted. We worked with the consulate, which had real responsibility for that, to try to maneuver him out of town. It took a while. Once he was out again, he was free and we couldn't deport him and the Yugoslavs didn't want to. They didn't want that image. He would start all over again. Finally, someone sent him some money and he agreed to get a ticket. His relatives worked with him. He was mentally disturbed but not uncontrollable. He was a pleasant person. He just was totally irresponsible in terms of how he conducted himself with regard to money. That was the only incident like that.

Q: In '86, you left there. Whither?

WILLIAMS: Then I went to Dutch language training for six months. Then in summer of '87, I went to the Hague as information officer.

Q: You were there from '87 until when?

WILLIAMS: '91.

Q: How did you find Dutch?

WILLIAMS: It was pretty easy compared to what I had to deal with before. It was not a particularly melodious language, at least not as spoken by foreigners, and some of the Dutch accents are pretty strong. It wasn't particularly difficult. I'm not a good linguist anyway, so I have to work in any language. One of the benefits has been that it's helped me understand a lot of German, at least in written form.

Q: In '87, you were the information officer doing what?

WILLIAMS: It was essentially the press attache job. I did stuff like prepare the daily press summary for the Dutch press for the country team meetings. I was the embassy spokesman. I did a lot of contact work with Dutch journalists, responded to their questions. I also directed the American Documentation Center, a variation on the old USIA library pattern. Also, we had a small audio visual program and I administered that. That was the one that was the USIA television network. That was basically it.

Q: Who was our ambassador? This was during the Bush administration.

WILLIAMS: The ambassador when I got there was John Shad. He was there for about two years. He was replaced by Howard Wilkins. John Shad was the former head of the Security and Exchange Commission. Wilkins was a Wichita businessman.

Q: How did these two gentlemen work?

WILLIAMS: Having both come out of business (Shad had previously been in one of the Stark companies), their focus tended to be on obviously the government but also they were very strongly working with the business community. This made sense considering the Netherlands at that time when I got there was the second largest foreign investor in the United States. I think they got bumped down to third in that time. So, their dealings tended to be directly with the government and they had access to the highest levels fairly easily and certainly at a high level all the time. The Dutch were very forthcoming. All the diverse elements of the government, the parliamentarians and ministers, etc., were fairly accessible to the ambassador and his deputy. I didn't see a particular approach to the embassy. The routine of the embassy was pretty much as one would expect. Shad was different in that he had a staff meeting every day and a country team meeting every morning. I don't recall if Wilkins did or not because I stopped going to them at one point.

Q: How did you find the Dutch media? It became quite a critical period of time because it saw the change in Germany, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disappearance of Soviet rule in Eastern Europe.

WILLIAMS: I had been told before I went out there to expect a rough time, but I guess things had calmed down a little bit. The major issue had been the one that had been the most recently difficult for the embassy to deal with, and that was getting the Dutch to agree to placement of intermediate range missiles, Pershing IIs, in Holland. There was a whole big debate about how we were going to put this new missile into Europe. That was rather a bruising debate. By then, the Dutch had accepted it and we were actually in the process of building the infrastructure to receive it. Then they would negotiate it off the table, so everybody was... They were a little less hard-hitting than they might have been otherwise when I got in there. Of course, the issues were different. There weren't such bad issues. But I generally found them very professional. We didn't always agree. I didn't always agree with what they wrote. They didn't always believe what I told them. But I enjoyed working with them.

Q: For years, we had had these demonstrations in Amsterdam during the '60s and '70s particularly against the Vietnam War but they had other overtones of left-wing groups. Was Amsterdam seen as a problem or had that died out?

WILLIAMS: I don't remember that being a major problem, an overwhelming sense of anti-Americanism. There was definitely a strain there. That was never going to go away. But it wasn't at the movement stage anymore. They didn't have the huge demonstrations. The issues that came up tended to be rather focused and short-lived. I'm trying to remember if the Gulf War even provoked any kind of reaction. I'm sure it did, but in terms of large scale...

Q: Most of Europe pretty well went along... I rather think that the Dutch put a couple mine layers or something like that into the...

WILLIAMS: Yes. They were represented. But I mean in terms of just a posture toward war in the Gulf. I think Iraq's invasion of Kuwait-

Q: It really galvanized the...

WILLIAMS: Yes. So, that was an issue. We tended to get into little sideline things like the treatment of gay American soldiers. One was court-martialed. That got people's attention. In contrast to us (at that time it was grounds for dismissal from the Service), the Dutch had a gay soldiers union within the military. So, those kinds of issues tended to be for capital punishment. There was some soldier that murdered and dismembered his wife. He was arrested by the Dutch police. Whether or not he would be extradited to the United States became a rallying issue for some because he would be liable for capital punishment. Those kinds of things tended to...

Q: How were the Dutch reacting to the events of '89 leading to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany, which the Dutch had never been wild about having a powerful Germany on its border, and here you had a more powerful Germany. Did you get any feel for the reaction?

WILLIAMS: Not one that would necessarily be accurate. I think it was the same sense of euphoria initially when the Communist regimes began to unravel. Everyone was watching CNN and everybody recognized it as a good thing. They had the same public discussions that we had, about the advisability and the benefit of having Germany reunited so quickly. I think there were people in the U.S., too, who would have preferred two separate Germanies competing. The Dutch must have had that as well. But I think the general feeling was that anything that buried communism deeper had to be good, even if you had reservations about some aspects of it.

Q: Was there much flow of young students to the U.S.?

WILLIAMS: Yes. There were so many that there was no way to track them. The Dutch had the money. For instance, they funded more than half the Fulbright program, which was our formal exchange. Given the nature of the relations between the two countries, there were all kinds of informal student exchanges that were going on around us. English was widely spoken. Two examples of that. One of the universities, the University of Leiden, had a formal proposal - and I think they may have implemented it to some degree - that classes be conducted in English rather than in Dutch. They had a very pragmatic attitude toward language, as they do toward other things, the Dutch in general. The second thing is an anecdote. (End of tape)

I was home on home leave and one of the U.S. networks was going a week of programming from Holland. I was sitting at the breakfast table one morning watching this. The American journalist was interviewing a guy who was the gardener at the Princess' palace, one of the Queen's palaces actually, with really elaborate formal gardens. He was talking to him about the work that he did there. I said to my family, "You know what's really remarkable about this interview?" They said, "That he's doing it in English?" I said, "Well, that, but also he's a gardener doing it in English." That said a lot about the society and the status of English there and our relationship.

Q: Tell me about the change in communications. When you started out, things were rather traditional, but now we have CNN, a commercial network which is on a worldwide basis where an awful lot of people get the news events. You have the WorldNet and e-mail. How would you say this was changing things?

WILLIAMS: You mean in general?

Q: Yes, for your type of work.

WILLIAMS: It means that people have a lot more sources of getting information and getting it faster. That means that we now are competing with other sources in order to get information that you feel is important and that address your concerns. To some extent, we use those tools, too. Now you can get materials to people via e-mail with an e-mail attachment. WorldNet went away as a network and has been reestablished on a smaller scale as American Embassy TV. But given CNN and other networks that have gotten into the act, that's a hard one. What you end up doing is trying to find your niche and find a way of presenting yourself to that niche market in a way that will get their attention long enough to deliver the message. The tools have made things easier, but they've also made it much more competitive.

Q: I would think something like CNN would in some ways complicate the issue because it's episodic. It depends where the cameras are. It's short, as all TV is. But the problem is that this is the only game in town, the only one reporting out of Somalia or something like that. Did you find you had to watch CNN and respond to CNN?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. That's become more pronounced now with what happened in Afghanistan. Everything since 9/11 has, if anything, maybe it needed to be done sooner, but certainly it appears the Department's found a different model for the way it handles rapidly evolving news in those far flung areas in terms of public affairs. What we found there was that the headlines were hitting the papers in the Eastern Hemisphere before we had a chance to get our perspective into it. We were always chasing the story with our viewpoint. By then, the impression is already formed. We were more conscious of that. I expect that to be a future feature of public diplomacy, public affairs support. We're still very much concerned with the long-term views and the image of the United States. It's one of the things that is going to extend into the future that we'll have this bifurcated or two pronged role to deal with the breaking news and the impressions formed by that but also we have to be careful that doesn't get lost or that we don't lose those long-term efforts to build the confidence and deep understanding of society that often will help you get through those times.

Q: One of the problems I think we've had over the years in Europe has been that in many countries, the people learn about the United States through movies and TV and there really isn't much in the way of American studies at the universities. Educated Americans get a pretty good dose of European history, at least they used to, but I'm not sure that most Europeans are getting a good dose of American history. Were we trying to do anything about that or was the Netherlands a different game?

WILLIAMS: The Netherlands is a special case because they did have a strong American studies awareness. There were American studies programs in the universities. We wanted to help make them stronger and broader and so we worked in doing that. But their American studies programs are at the level with the... The head of the American Studies Association of European Universities was a Dutch person. So, they had been very active in developing and promoting it. But in general, yes, you're right. It isn't as strong as we would like to see it. It's something that USIA was working toward building and continues today, although I think we don't have as many resources to devote to it.

Q: How did the two ambassadors in the Netherlands use the public diplomacy branch of the embassy?

WILLIAMS: Ambassador Shad used it primarily as a source of information to keep track of opinion as reflected in the Dutch press. He worked more closely with the public affairs officer in doing representational things that would enhance the embassy's image. Wilkins used it in very much the same way, but he was also very much interested in promoting the image of the ambassador as an active figure in the country. He was very interested in having things that would feature him as a reflection of American interests in the country. So, he appeared more frequently.

Q: Was the Dutch royal family a target of interest?

WILLIAMS: We saw the Dutch royal family in the perspective that they were a revered institution and one that had certain constitutional responsibilities or at least claimed to. But the real power lay in the democracy and in the constitution. We had a realistic posture toward them. It was respectful and the royal family played a role and yet we recognized the limitations of their power.

Q: Did we see any fractures in Dutch society as one could always see in Belgian society, for example?

WILLIAMS: Not to that extent. Holland is pretty much a homogeneous country. You don't have a separate language group. But there are differences, like any country. Even though that's a small one, it has a number of states and there are different cultural characteristics in the different regions. But those didn't necessarily translate into the kind of political tensions that you see in some places.

Q: You mentioned the Dutch being ambassadors to the United States. I know they own right now the major grocery store here in the Washington area, Giant. My wife is always cursing the Dutch if they don't have whatever she wants. Were the Dutch making any investments in the communications area - newspapers, television?

WILLIAMS: I don't recall that. I remember some big takeovers of food companies.

Q: In other words, there wasn't any concern on our part about Dutch influence on the public media.

WILLIAMS: No. I don't recall any concern about any Dutch investment. It was kind of "the more, the merrier."

Q: Did the collapse of the Soviet rule have any effect on operations in the Netherlands?

WILLIAMS: No, it was always a very free environment. We could do anything that we wanted. I don't recall ever not being able to do something. That continued through.

Q: When you left there in '91, what did you do?

WILLIAMS: I came back to Washington and became the chief of the UPN "Wireless File," which would require some explanation.

Q: Yes.

WILLIAMS: USIA had a publication called the "Wireless File," which was a daily compilation of all the most important policy materials on different issues that we felt were of interest to foreign audiences.

Q: This would be government sources?

WILLIAMS: Yes, or it could be other copyrighted material. But primarily government sources. There would be transcripts of press conferences, texts of speeches, articles that our staff had written. But all of them were meant to explain American policy in whatever area. The way USIA was organized, we had a branch office for each region so that there was one for Europe, one for Africa, one for Latin America, one for the ME, and South Asia, etc. Because it was assumed that each region had its own constellation of issues that would be of interest, each regional office would put together a "Wireless File" that was designed for that region. I had the one for Europe.

Q: What feedback were you getting? How was this used?

WILLIAMS: They were used for a number of things. First of all, for its own information. It was distributed within the mission so that people would have the Secretary's speech to read in their spare time. Also some posts would select items from the "Wireless File" and would send those items to selected people in the host country geared to those people's interests. Some would actually take parts of it and compile it into a post publication and then distribute that throughout the country to the people who they felt were interested in those topics. It continues today. It's now called the "Washington File." It's a SD product now.

Q: You were doing this from '91 to when?

WILLIAMS: To '93. During that time, up until '92 or so, we only did it in English. But in '92, we started a Russian version. That would have been roughly summer of '92. The Russian file was then distributed among the republics of the former SU. Actually, anyone could pull it down and one of the big users turned out to be Israel because of the Russian $\frac{1}{2}$ migr $\frac{1}{2}$ community. I did that until '93.

Then I went to the FS Grievance Board from '93 until '94.

Q: What were you doing there?

WILLIAMS: I was one of the special assistants. There were members of the Board who actually adjudicated the cases, but we were there in part to help with correspondence and some of the research and to contribute our insights on some of the issues the Board was dealing with.

Q: What sort of grievances were you getting?

WILLIAMS: There was everything from EERs [efficiency reports] to complaints about people having had to pay for part of a household shipment to issues related to home leave expenses. It was a wide variety. The interesting pattern that emerged from this was that, if you looked at the size of the officer corps, because it wasn't only the Foreign Service, proportionately, there were more grievances on the State Department side than there were on the USIA side. Nobody was really ever sure why that was the case. But I would guess it resulted from two things. One, a difference in bureaucratic culture. As a small organization, USIA tended to be more tolerant of exceptions. Also, you had a very active employee relations division so that a lot of issues that could have risen to the level of the Board never made it there because of action before that.

Q: How did you find the Board members? Were they tough or knowledgeable?

WILLIAMS: Yes, both. The toughness issue really had a range. They weren't uniformly tough. Some were tougher than others. But they were all knowledgeable. They were either experienced FS officers or in some cases experienced mediation people, professors from Georgetown. Some of them had law degrees. Some just had their FS degree, their Ph.D. in foreign service.

Q: Were they supportive or not very supportive of... We have lots of rules and regulations and we've got people who enforce these things to a fare thee well. Did you find that the Board was a little more understanding of the problems of personnel and maybe the system itself?

WILLIAMS: Yes, I think they were understanding, but they also... Any judgments were based on a reading of the regulations as well as interpreting them and applying them to a particular case.

Q: Did you see any feedback? Let's say a regulation caught somebody and didn't make much sense. We're talking about something on a worldwide basis. You draw something up and find that for people coming out of South Asia it doesn't seem to work. Was there a feedback so that the regulations were looked at again after particular cases for change?

WILLIAMS: I don't remember any specific cases, but I think the general posture of the Board was to, where it felt that it could make recommendations, they had to judge it on the record, but where it felt their recommendations were in order that went beyond what the law said, they felt free to do that. They wouldn't necessarily base the judgement on what the law should have said, but they would make note of the fact that... And it would depend on what it was. If it was U.S. code, nobody's going to change that. But if it was Department regulation...

Q: This was the era where sexual harassment became very much an issue for a while. People were being trained and everybody was sort of running for cover because they weren't quite sure what "sexual harassment" meant. It was sort of in the eye of the beholder. Was this an issue that you all were dealing with?

WILLIAMS: No, I don't remember that.

Q: Maybe it arose before or after.

WILLIAMS: It could have been, too, that there were different levels. Only those issues that couldn't be mediated or resolved at a lower level actually came to the Board.

Q: Without naming names, can you think of any particular issues that stuck in mind that you were having to deal with?

WILLIAMS: I can't remember them. Some of the tougher ones seemed to involve time in class, what was on the clock, should the clock have been suspended for some reason, therefore giving that person a different time in class? They tended to be all over the place. There was no consistent... EERs, whether or not certain information should be excised. I remember a number of requirements for a reconstituted panel for whatever reason. Sometimes that was related to time in class, if the person would have been eligible for consideration by that panel because of something that had happened before for which the clock should have been stopped, that type of thing. Those tended to be the things that people were most unrelenting and unwilling to resolve at the lower level.

Q: This is a good place to stop. Where did you go then?

WILLIAMS: From there, I went back to Prague.

Q: You went to Prague in '95. Quite a different Prague.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: Alright, we'll pick it up then.

Today is January 27, 2003. The last time you were in Prague was from when to when?

WILLIAMS: My first assignment there was 1976-'79.

Q: So this was during a very cold period in our relations.

WILLIAMS: Yes. Probably the coldest in the Cold War period as far as our relations were concerned.

Q: You went to Prague. This was the Czech Republic?

WILLIAMS: Yes, it had already divided into two countries before I got there.

Q: You were there from '95 to when?

WILLIAMS: From '95 until the summer of '98.

Q: You were PAO (Public Affairs Officer).

WILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: What was the political-economic situation in the Czech Republic at this point?

WILLIAMS: At that point, it was seven years after the communist government had fallen. It was a burgeoning capitalist democracy. It was still somewhat in the transitional phase. I think they often refer to it as that. But the free market was alive and well. It still had a bit of the boomtown flavor that it had in 1990. I had gone back there to work on a presidential visit in 1990 just for a couple of weeks. Then it really did have a boomtown flavor.

Q: I don't think you've mentioned the presidential visit before. Could you talk about that?

WILLIAMS: I was relegated to working with the press primarily during that one. It was 1990. President Bush had gone there for a presidential visit. It was obviously a big event. It drew large crowds in the famous square, Wenceslas Square, where Jan Palach had burned himself to death and there was a statue of one of the Czech majors, historical and also symbolic in terms of the Czech nation. Beyond that, there isn't much I can say about the visit.

Q: Did you deal with the Czech press or were you pretty well trying to keep the American press happy?

WILLIAMS: I was working with the American press primarily in the Press Center. It was as usual a busy time, but nothing unusual or exceptional happened.

Q: Who was our ambassador in the Czech Republic in '95?

WILLIAMS: Adrian Basora was the ambassador when I arrived there. He is a State Department career officer.

Q: How did he operate?

WILLIAMS: He was very well organized, very meticulous. He had very good relations with the Czech officials. He was very much involved in the cultural life particularly, the arts, and really enjoyed working with those groups, entertained a lot, had a really wide circle of friends and contacts. Mrs. Basora was also very active in the arts area. They hosted all kinds of events at the residence, which during the Cold War had become a very special venue. That was the one place where Czechs felt that they could go to... It was almost a symbolic presence equal to the embassy.

Q: In the Czech Republic, the arts were quite important, weren't they?

WILLIAMS: Yes, especially during the years of communism, they sustained a sense of whatever independence people felt or harbored, feelings and their hopes, by and large, the intellectual community, particularly the writers, provided leadership during the Prague Spring and during the subsequent period when that was aborted by the Russian invasion. But because of their influential role in leading the dissident movement, Czech writers and other artists, musicians, etc., had a very special role to play when Czechoslovakia's communist government left. It left the intellectuals in a leading position in the political life of the country. That was starting to change. You could already see the influence that it was becoming more and more professional politicians who were rising to the leadership roles in the Party. But the writers were still there, primarily Vaclav Havel, who is probably the last major literary figure involved in Czech politics at the national level. He was himself a playwright before becoming a dissident and eventually becoming president of the country. The esteem in which he was held reflected a general esteem that the public in general had for the intellectual class. Czechs were very proud people and very proud of their historical heritage and the intellectual part is an important component of that. One of the interesting things that happened during this period was, because of budget cuts and technology developments, there was in our public affairs posture worldwide a move to deemphasize the kind of general cultural programs just because we didn't have the resources. There were no longer the big touring groups, etc. One of the things it was suggested that we do to conserve it was to not pay as much attention to those segments of society and focus more on the political/media types. But Czechoslovakia or the Czech Republic at that time was one of those places that you could make the case that this was not the place to make those kind of changes just because the intellectual class, the writers, most people, even if they weren't dominating the political scene the way they had at the time that the communist government felt still were very much a part of the psychic of the Czech people. This was something that they had always admired. They were very proud of their culture and these people as the standard-bearers of their culture exercised influence that was out of proportion perhaps to their numbers or in comparison with other societies. That certainly was a major consideration in our working with the Czechs.

Q: Another society where the intellectuals have quite a bit of influence is the French society and to a lesser extent the British society. There, the intellectuals almost all come out of the left-wing and they're having a heyday in these days knocking the United States. But I would think that the Czech intellectuals had fought essentially the communist movement and would be a different breed of cat. Were they?

WILLIAMS: they were probably less left-wing than a lot of other intellectuals if you take them as a group in other societies. But they were still, by American standards, to the left of center in their thinking. They did come out of a strong tradition of government involvement and social democratic movement. Looking at Czech history, they almost instinctively since their independence have been a social democratic country and gravitated toward that velocity and outlook. I did a paper once for that academic program that I did at Georgetown on the Czech Communist Party between World War I and World War II. One of the things that I read was that when the Czech Communist Party went to the various international congresses about what they were writing and saying publicly, Otto Enner was quoted in one of the readings as saying that the Czech Communist Party was the best Social Democratic Party in Europe. So, right now, they have an obvious mix of parties, but in general they still favor a strong government involvement in maintaining social welfare and setting standards in that.

Q: Was there a significant support of the arts - plays, music - by the government?

WILLIAMS: Yes. That continued, although by the time I left, they were having financial difficulties as part of this restructuring process and it was becoming more difficult. But they were still very heavily involved and people expected them to be.

Q: With the Ambassador's and his wife's involvement in cultural things, was there much interest in the American cultural side?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. There had always been a strong interest in the United States when I was there during communist years. Then it was the attraction of forbidden fruit. But also once the society was liberated, people had an opportunity to see more things American and experience them by traveling more and having more things flown into the country. That interest didn't seem to wane, but it did generate conflict because of the fact that people felt that American culture and Western European culture to some extent was so attractive that it was threatening to swamp their own culture, that it was out-competing their culture. The Estée Lauder family had become part of a joint venture with some Europeans and they had started a TV station that carried a lot of American programming, and not the best. And they became famous or in some cases infamous for that. They did some rather risqué things, things that wouldn't even make it on American TV, with the weather.

Q: As I recall, if it was going to be a hot day, the weather woman would arrive with no clothes on.

WILLIAMS: Yes. That was one of the extremes. They tended to do that. They went for a jazzier "American" format.

Q: Was there any attraction to the German, French, or Russian culture?

WILLIAMS: Russian culture wasn't... People who had known the Soviets didn't... At one time, it was required to have it in school. The languages are close enough that one native speaker of a Slavic language can relatively easily pick up at least the essentials and maintain them. But no one spoke Russian anymore. They would admit to knowing it maybe, but...

Q: How about the French and German cultures? Were they able to have flourishing programs there?

WILLIAMS: I think they did well. I didn't go to a lot of them. One of the advantages they had was, they spent a lot of money and had more resources than us. So they were constantly doing things. I guess they were reasonably well attended. The Czechs still had feelings about the Germans. They respect and admire them but there is still a lot of residual feeling because of the war and also the fact that the Germans when they came into a free Czechoslovakia were very aggressive in establishing their business positions. Also, in the borderlands, the Sudeten region, those claims came back. Germans started demanding some kind of restitution either for property or some kind of compensation. On the other hand, you had Germans bringing in lots of money and hiring Czechs to work in businesses.

Q: One of the concerns was that Germany would move into Central Europe as the dominant power. Was that a concern at that time?

WILLIAMS: No. That wasn't part of our discourse. Maybe at the strategic level somewhere they were concerned about that. But the Czechs had their eye on everyone. They didn't want to be bought out. Any group of businesses or whatever trying to come in. They wanted the investment and the expertise and they knew that that came with accepting the businesspeople. But at the same time, they didn't want it at any cost. They wanted it to enrich the Czech Republic financially or culturally. But they didn't want to do it at the expense of the Czech Republic becoming something other than the Czech Republic.

Interesting note on the cultural thing. When you travel around the Czech Republic, there are several interesting things to note. One is the signage. In the center of Prague, the signs generally tend to be in English and German. As you go down to the south near the Austrian border, the English disappears and it's all German. Then there are certain parts like around Karlovy Vary, which during the Soviet Union time was a big center for Soviet high officials to travel to to take advantage of the spas that were there. Even after the Soviet Union passed away, it still remained a center for Russians to visit. You go to Karlovy Vary and the signs are in Czech, German, and Russian. You kind of know where they're making their money.

Q: You were a public affairs officer. You dealt with the media a lot. Where was the Czech media coming from?

WILLIAMS: There was a blossoming of the media, but they didn't have the traditions that we had in the West. So, for them, at least in the time I was there, their focus was on building their professional standards. They had outside help from American NGOs and other foreign NGOs that were coming in to train journalists in how to do research, reporting standards, journalistic ethics, and so forth. They tended to write stories from a particular point of view. The papers have political profiles. Often, it's not reflected just in the editorials but in the stories that are selected and the way they're written. But what they wanted to do was establish that objectivity and the research so that you got the three sources before you go with any kind of controversial reporting. I felt all the papers were committed to that. They had different niches. They had tabloids like everyone else and they tended to be tabloid in format and the way they were written. But they had several serious newspapers, including Rudi Pravda, the Communist Party organ and one of two or three newspapers in Czechoslovakia when I was there in the '70s. That had expanded out so that they had six or seven dailies that were considered serious. They had different levels of resources. The two leading papers at the time were Mladí½ Fronta, the Youth Front's old newspaper, which blossomed into a full-fledged one; DNES today, and then Rudi Pravda, which still had a left of center slant. That meant "Red Truth." But it was a private newspaper and no longer belonged to the Party. It was actually owned by some of the employees. DNES and Rudi Pravda were the two top papers. DNES was further to the right. Rudi Pravda was center-left. One of the interesting things that happened in the '90s was that foreign companies came in and bought a lot of newspapers so that Austrians came in... Around the time that I left, Rudi Pravda was still the only Czech-owned paper.

Q: I would think this would cause some disquiet. If we were living in the United States and all of a sudden the Washington papers were run by the Nicaraguans or something like that, we wouldn't be very happy.

WILLIAMS: Yes. There was note made of it, but it was never a major issue. It was discussed publicly, is this a good idea? There may have been a couple of editorials. But in talking with the Germans, they said that in no case had they been given editorial direction by the foreign owners. They made those decisions.

Q: How did you find the residue of the communist rule? In many countries now, including Poland, the professional politicians were communists because you couldn't be anything else but. And they have begun to come to the fore again as people, not necessarily advocating their communist theology. What was happening during this period to the old Party types?

WILLIAMS: They were in the Party still. They still had a Communist Party. At one point, before the Prague Spring, a lot of people joined the Communist Party because it was what you did, not necessarily be a Party worker, but you got into the Party and that gave you certain avenues. That was one of the problems that the Russians had with the Czech party, that it was too large. As a result of '68, they purged it to get rid of all those people who were just kind of coasting with their cards. So, there was no great stigma at having been a member of the Party. It was more what your role was that followed you. There was a certain term for this process of going back and looking at people's records to see what they had been in the Party or had been doing with an eye to perhaps punish those who were in positions that had been detrimental to the welfare of the people.

Q: In our embassy and American policy in particular, did we have any things we were pushing or did we feel that Czechoslovakia was a solid democracy and it was normal state to state relations or was there more still a teacher-pupil type relationship?

WILLIAMS: I don't know if I'd call it a "teacher-pupil" relationship. It was more an established democracy-young democracy relationship. It was acknowledged the Czechs were going to be the ones to build their democracy, but one of the things America wanted to do was to help them strengthen it. There were lots of programs that were designed to develop civic consciousness and civic activities. We had a democracy program where we gave grants for people wanting to do grassroots projects that we felt would contribute to the development of civil society. There were things like setting up... There was one group that came in that wanted to set up an organization that would teach fund-raising techniques, how to generate money. Another one to organize groups to address environmental issues in their community. Another felt it wanted to do a publication that would dispel the parliamentarians and get some information about them and the government decisions on a regular basis. These were relatively small grants, four or five people sometimes. There were lots of those kinds of small projects. Of course, we did programming that we felt would contribute to that. USIA had in 1995 put together a conference that they called "CIVITAS" that was to be an international conference in which participants from around the world who were involved in civil society would come and share ideas. They decided to hold it in Prague for symbolic reasons as well as because it was just a nice place to have a conference. The Czechs got very much involved in that. The government was very helpful to us. So, there was that element. Also, there was close economic development. By the time I left, AID was closing down by '98. There was nothing more for AID to do. Czechs obviously were going to need to go further in their development economically, but not at the levels that AID works.

Q: Did you find any concern at the Embassy of smart operators from the U.S. coming to make a quick buck in Czechoslovakia or organizations that were not of the greatest repute?

WILLIAMS: There was probably some of that. I don't recall that the Embassy found itself involved in that kind of thing. Maybe by the mid-'90s, the Czechs were leery and cautious about those things. Occasionally - but it happens in any country where you work - an enterprise comes in, sets up, and no one's really sure about them. They may not have much of a track record or you may not think it's a good idea. But they're not interested in what you think and taking advice. That would happen from time to time.

Q: Prague was one of the great student centers during the '90s. All the young people from the U.S. and I assume from other parts of Europe were heading towards Prague, where they were going to be teaching or just getting together.

WILLIAMS: There was still an element of that there, but the pioneers had moved on to Bucharest by then. We were left with those who were settling down. Some had gotten jobs and some had set up their own businesses. The raw edge was gone. I'm sure there weren't as many. Even the Czechs noted that there seemed to be fewer American students. Bucharest was the place to be by the time I got there.

Q: How did you see things and what were the ties with Slovakia?

WILLIAMS: It was like brothers and sisters bickering. There was a certain tension there. The Czechs felt that the Slovaks had forced the breakup. The Slovaks felt the Czechs were too quick to take them up on the offer. But there was a lot of back and forth. Mečiar was the Prime Minister during the time that I was there. He was an old fashioned leftist. But they had kind of the hangover of the breakup. Certain things hadn't been resolved, although it had been peaceful and went relatively smoothly.

Q: It happened with no referendum or anything like that.

WILLIAMS: It happened quickly and people were of mixed minds about whether or not it was good. Those that thought it was a good idea felt that the Slovaks were a drain on the Czech Republic's development. The Czech lands had been an industrial center. When the communists came in, Slovakia was still agricultural, primarily rural. The Slovak communists had such a dominant place in the Czechoslovak Communist Party that they started building up industries down in Slovakia. Those were munitions industries, which in a post-Cold War world were hard-pressed to maintain themselves. That was one of the issues. There were others like the large number of Romani gypsies that lived in Slovakia and wanted to become Czechs by virtue of having moved there at some point. That was a point of tension. The asymmetry in the economies where the Slovak economy was much weaker. All that contributed. But one interesting thing happened. I visited Bratislava. That was not as prosperous or big as Prague, but it was doing reasonably well. We went to this one dance festival in a small town near the Slovak border. It was an international dance festival, so there were groups from different places in the world. Everybody was very enthusiastic, but the biggest reception was for the Slovaks. It was like welcoming your long lost brother. There are still those feelings that are very positive. Whatever negative things might go on residually, it's a close relationship.

Q: What was our policy towards joining the European Union and NATO?

WILLIAMS: NATO was one of our foreign policy goals, to help the Czechs achieve NATO membership. People were more enthusiastic about it earlier, but as time went on, the public opinion was relatively soft about coming into NATO. It hovered in the 40s and slightly above 50 on occasion. By now, it was the mid-'90s. The Soviet Union was gone. They were struggling with the economy and what to do with the resources. There were no enemies on the horizon. I think people felt that while they were glad NATO existed and saw the benefit of NATO, they weren't sure that the Czech Republic needed to be in it. The government worked on that, trying to explain to the people that NATO was a good idea. They invited Americans to come in and talk to people. So, we sponsored speakers.

Q: Were we pushing hard on coming into NATO or were we ambivalent?

WILLIAMS: Probably before I got there, it wasn't a foregone conclusion. It was part of a discussion. The Czechs, certainly President Havel, wanted it and I gather this was a topic of discussion when President Clinton was there. Then once we came to the conclusion that this was something that we were going to support... There was still the whole European political climate to take into account, the recently unified Germany. Russia was still evolving in its thinking about its relationship with the U.S. It was in the early stage of evolving. There were a lot of other things that had to be considered. Whether or not NATO was ready to take in another partner. Not all the NATO countries were convinced when it came around to it one by one. That was a major concern in those days.

Q: How about the European Union?

WILLIAMS: They were enthusiastic about that until they started getting an up-close picture of what was involved and then they became more ambivalent. But I think by the time it was time to get serious about the EU, people recognized that this was where they had to be.

Q: Were we pushing this?

WILLIAMS: I don't know if we were pushing it. I wouldn't say that. But we recognized the benefits to the Czechs. That was a decision that they made up their minds on without looking for much input from outside.

Q: As PAO, how did you treat a major political issue in the U.S. of Monica Lewinski and the whole Whitewater business? This had been a very difficult time under President Clinton. It was both embarrassing and hard to explain. Whitewater was sort of nothing which went on for four years.

WILLIAMS: Yes. Actually, it was pretty easy. The Czechs really liked President Clinton. They have a different way of looking at these things than the American press or at least some large segments of the American public. They just thought it was kind of silly.

Q: Were there any issues that were major issues you had to deal with?

WILLIAMS: The issues that we were dealing with were promoting civic society and democracy, the entrance into NATO. The last year that I was there, there was a focus derived from the civic society theme. That was the condition of the Romani, the gypsy population, and how the Czechs were managing that social issue. We helped them sponsor a big conference where they brought together people from all over the government and a lot of the NGOs to talk about how to improve the relationship and better integrate them into society. We also on our IV program brought to the U.S. a group of people who were in key positions in different ministries to see how we dealt with minority issues in our country. They came back and formed an association and started doing projects in the country. Economics was always one topic.

Q: With the Romani, was there work with France and other places, Spain? There is this gypsy minority in so many of these countries because they are associated by many people with minor criminal activities and all that, a population that goes through and it may be a minority but it gives that group a very bad name. We've never had to really deal with this. We've had small groups of gypsies but not many.

WILLIAMS: It's a difficult issue. It's kind of hard to come up with a simple answer. Even in our circumstances, because of hardline minority issues and in a lot of cases very different... We were dealing with minority populations that were disadvantaged and we took certain measures to alleviate those problems. One of the big differences with the Romani community is that it tends to be insular. So, they are living in a society with their own traditions and culture and the society is offering them certain things in terms of education and seeking to reach out. But a lot of them just don't want to be part of the education thing. They don't necessarily want their kids to go to school beyond a certain age.

Q: They've been doing this... This is how they've existed for 1,000 years or so.

WILLIAMS: Right. That's one aspect of it. Then you've got the standard residual prejudice on the part of a lot of people. They have a growing Skinhead movement in the country. That was not directed just to Romani but also foreigners, at least darker skinned foreigners. There was goodwill on the part of certain key officials, but I think they were baffled at finding a quick solution. One of the things that we emphasized is, there is no quick solution. We had been dealing with this for decades. What you look for are incremental means. When I left, they were at the stage of building confidence, where the Romani community felt confident of their interlocutor on the other side.

Q: You were there during some major parts of the Bosnian crisis, weren't you?

WILLIAMS: Yes. That was toward the end.

Q: Did that have much of an effect? It was a Slavic country that was coming apart.

WILLIAMS: Yes, but the Czechs were helpful to us in supporting us and supporting our efforts in Bosnia. But in terms of the discourse about it, they talked about it the way an Austrian or a German might talk about it, that this was terrible to be going on in the heart of Europe, that Europeans would be demonstrating this kind of behavior in this time in history. They were very anxious to help out in bringing it to some kind of peaceful resolution. But I don't think they identified with them. They contrasted.

Q: "Those Slavs down south are not us."

WILLIAMS: Yes, that starts at the southern Slovene border.

Q: Is there anything else we should talk about? Any incidents or developments when you were there?

WILLIAMS: I can't think of anything.

Q: In '98, where did you go?

WILLIAMS: In '98, I came back to Washington and knocked around for a year. I was the senior advisor to the director of USIA for a while in charge of opening up their office. By that time, consolidation of USIA and the State Department was on track. There were different stages. First of all, the USIA area office for Europe was moved into the EUR bureau as an experiment and then the director of USIA was to establish a full-time office over at State as part of that slow process. Then there were negotiations going on in the background about how and in what manner the process could be completed. I was there for just a few months. Then I went to work in Policy and Planning, S/P, for three months while I was waiting to take over the assignment that I retired from. That was as director of the Office of Geographic Liaison in the Information Bureau in USIA. I took over in July of '99. Then in October of '99, the consolidation was completed.

Q: What was the feeling from your contemporaries in USIA about this consolidation?

WILLIAMS: Most people were very unhappy about it. They felt that USIA once it was in the Department, the work in public diplomacy would become less important, that we'd be more subjected to the bureaucratic strictures that the Department had. USIA was bureaucratic, but the people inside felt it was much more flexible. It was a smaller organization. It was noted for having very people friendly policies. A very good labor relations approach. That was USIA's contribution to the overall reinvention effort, to reorganize the Information Bureau, the one that I eventually went into. So, they set up something that was totally different, a team based organization. We had team leaders in the hierarchy. There were very few elements of bureaucracy within the Bureau. People were told that they were given more responsibility for the projects that they actually worked on to the extent that they didn't have to report back before taking a decision or go to a higher level for most decisions. They issued something called the I Bureau driver's license to the effect of, "If it needs to be done and it's legal, just do it." That was pretty much the posture going in. People were fearful. Part of it was that once we were in, USIA would be used to satisfy any position cuts that were imposed on the Department. The resources for public diplomacy would be sucked up by the other bureaus and used for their programs as opposed to public diplomacy. Congress itself anticipated and was concerned about some of those things that the employees were concerned about. When they set up the merger, they firewalled the public diplomacy budget, which means that when they allocated State's budget, they said, "This is for public diplomacy, period, and can't be used for other activities." That in itself caused a certain amount of tension overseas because other department officers from other cones see that money there and say, "Well, you've got that. Why can't we just put it all in the pot?" But because of the legislation, that can't be done.

Q: Was there concern that much of USIA work is involved in long-term things, International Visitors Program, cultural programs, and all that, which have proved their worth over the years of building up a cadre of foreigners who know the United States and admire the United States, appreciate our values, but this is not short-term, selling the policy... I've heard concern that they're afraid that USIA might turn into a "flack" for the present policy and all effort would be to sell our particular policy at the time rather than as long-term development of friendship and knowledge of the United States. How did you see that?

WILLIAMS: That was a concern. One of the distinctions that has always been made between USIA's view of diplomacy and public diplomacy and State's view is always short-term, selling the policy. USIA was involved in that as well, but it also devoted considerable resources to the long-term exchange type activities, the Fulbright Program, the International Visitors Program, etc. It was felt that there was not a full appreciation of the value of these things in the Department and that they would indeed suffer. What's happened is, the public diplomacy officers have felt that they've been on a permanent mission of education in the Department to make their State colleagues who are working in other areas aware of the benefits of this. So, that tension is there. It's still in a state of evolution. One thing that's happened is that the PD (Public Diplomacy) offices within the bureaus have become much more absorbed by the traditional State culture where the emphasis is on the briefing papers and the quick response on policy issues and pretty largely divorced from the long-term programs. But within the Bureau of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, there is the Educational Exchanges Office that runs and maintains all those programs. They work directly with the embassies and the regional bureaus, too. So, they've got an independent existence. They're not reliant upon the regional bureaus for their effectiveness. It certainly helps when the regional bureau is behind them, but the program can still operate and is still fully funded. It requires primarily the cooperation of the field. Officers in the field still are very much aware of the value of these programs. The regional bureaus, the more they're exposed to them, and they do have people now on their staff full-time who are used to working with these programs, will come to appreciate them more.

Q: Could you go through the title of your office and then explain what you were doing?

WILLIAMS: Yes. I was the director of the Office of Geographic Liaison, which means that I had a group of seven teams that worked directly with the posts overseas in getting products and service support for their overseas public diplomacy programs for the Information Bureau. What that meant is kind of hard to explain. We had seven teams. Five of them were geographic teams. They produced a publication called the "Washington File" for their region, which was the modern version of the old "Wireless File" that I talked about earlier. It was a compendium of speeches, transcripts, staff written articles, fact sheets that were generated, press releases. That was produced daily to be sent to the missions overseas for their information so that they would know the latest about whatever was going on in Washington that touched on international relations and also for distribution to their audiences overseas. Each of the regional teams produced that for their respective region. They also ran speaker programs where we would recruit American speakers. A post would come in with a request, let's say, for a speaker on economics - that was a big issue - and maybe some trade issue and they wanted a speaker that would address that. They would come in with the requirements, what they needed the speaker to do, what topics they needed him to address, and when they needed him, who he was going to be speaking to, etc., and then we would recruit the speaker. So, we did support for the speaker program. Also, some posts ran book translation programs. We would help administer those from the Washington side, help them get copyrights and funding for their programs. Also, each team had at least one regional information resource officer. This is what we started calling "librarians" after we got rid of the libraries and set up information resource centers. Now, we have information resource officers. But they were regional people. They each had 10-15 posts that they serviced. They provided professional support for training and advice. Each regional team had a staff of translators in a major regional language. For Europe, it was Russian. For East Asia, it was Mandarin Chinese. The Middle East was Arabic. Africa was French. And Western Hemisphere was Spanish. They had a team of translators and they would translate material from the "Washington File" primarily and create language versions of the File. There were some other smaller programs that those teams would administer for the posts in their region. They were five of them. In addition to that, we had a specialized team called Central Processing. They were kind of the giant vacuum cleaner. They would collect different texts and things off the web sites. They would follow press conference and things like that and collect all those materials and then distribute them to the respective team that would find them most interesting. One thing I should mention about the regional teams is that we each had a staff of writers who prepared stories on themes that were specific to that region. If you were in Latin America, your writers would write about themes that you would find interesting and useful in your distribution. The last team was the information resource team. They were like the policy guidance group for the information resource officers. That was a separate team and they took care of things at policy levels as opposed to the operational level that the team information resource officers worked at.

Q: You retired when?

WILLIAMS: I retired officially at the end of November, 2002.

Q: After the attack on the World Trade Center in NY on September 11th, 2001. We had a major effort to fight terrorism. Also, we were dealing with the Arab world. One of the questions was, "Why don't the Arabs like us?" You had a new administration, the Bush II administration, and a new director of public diplomacy, Charlotte Beers, came on, who was immediately tasked with making the Arabs love us or something like that. How did you see this?

WILLIAMS: I saw it as a tremendous challenge, to put it mildly. She came in with some new ideas and perspective on it and nobody really knew how it exactly worked. We knew the traditional things that we did and we also knew that a lot of the traditional things that we did were seriously weakened during those horrendous budget cuts of the '80s and '90s, like the disappearance of cultural centers, that type of thing. Ironically, to reestablish those things now would entail a security dimension that didn't exist before things deteriorated to this point. But yes, she came in with some new ideas, some new nomenclature, and I think people were willing to do their best to see how well these new approaches worked. They were modified to some extent to be more closer to the reality on the ground. But it doesn't seem like we made any big influence at this point.

Q: The task in many ways is not one that can be fixed by saying the right words.

WILLIAMS: Yes. It very often comes down to the fact that when you're dealing with a foreign people, what you do has a lot more impact than what you can ever say. In this case, the Arab public - and there is no homogeneous Arab public, obviously - a major concern that all of the Arab publics share is our policy in the Mid East, not just for what it means in the relationship between Arabs and the Palestinians and the Israelis, but for what they feel it says about our broader attitudes toward them and their whole cultural context - Islam and the Mid East in general.

Q: Were you picking up disquiet among the USIA people about the Bush administration? There has been a certain amount of "go it alone," publicly discounting our traditional allies in Europe and other places if they don't agree with us. Was this causing problems? I'm not talking about mutiny. I'm talking about concern, "We've got a real problem."

WILLIAMS: Probably, as in most cases like that when you have a complex issue, there are people on both sides. In general, the instinct in public diplomacy because the emphasis is on mutual understanding... At least it's my instinct. I think that our posture in public diplomacy tends to be that to reach that middle ground means that some kind of accommodation, some kind of acceptance, you're looking for acceptance, and that means that you have to be accepting... Communication when it works usually ends up being something of a compromise. At least at the minimum they're agreeing to listen to what you're saying and you're agreeing to listen to what they say in a serious way and not being dismissive. Diplomacy in the larger sense would naturally incline toward dealing with and working with responsible partners in a real partnership. I would think that in most cases, just the natural bias of diplomacy, which is to reach some kind of accord, and from a practical standpoint, what can you really do in a world this complex that is unilaterally effective. Even you are able to succeed in the short-term, don't undermine your long-term interests. Anyone that seriously thought about those issues had to have some concern about the possibility of our acting unilaterally on any issue of major international concern.

Q: From the perspective of 2003 now, public diplomacy, much of it is out there to get out information to people who otherwise wouldn't. There has been a tremendous change with the Internet and TV and the ability of people anywhere to have access to lots of information. How has this changed how we look at things and how we deal?

WILLIAMS: I don't think it's changed very much how we look at things. We've always, at least in the countries that I've worked in, which have primarily been European countries, in the last 10-15 years, it's always been a very competitive information environment. What's happened is, the speed at which the competition is carried on now. Before, it was slow motion so that you could do things consecutively. Nowadays, as soon as something is said anywhere, it goes up on the Net and it's everywhere. So, what it means now is that you have to be instantaneous, too, in getting your message out. You have to develop strategies that make you a source that people will look to among the others that they're evaluating at the same time. In IIP, where this has led us is to make a big component of our work the Web, the Internet. IIP maintains a Web site that has dozens of specialized pages on different issues relating to foreign policy. The last time somebody mentioned it to me, there were something like 280,000 pages in the various sites contained there. Then we have tried to use technology. We invite people from overseas to subscribe to certain Web pages or documents that are hosted and are frequently updated. So they can join this service. Another thing that has helped is, if you have a particular topic that you really have a strong interest in promoting or seeing that people are informed about it, getting your message out about if you are comprehensive and authoritative, you'll be recognized as being comprehensive and authoritative. Where this has happened, probably the best recent case was the response to September 11th, the attacks. The Information Bureau is now called the Office of International Information Programs. It established a Web site on terrorism. It had been two or three months when somebody went into Google and typed in the subject they were interested in and that Web site was number one or two. That's the kind of thing that gets you some credibility and gets you the attention that you really need to be competitive. The other pages, I'm sure, aren't that competitive. But that's a first step. There is quite a bit of attention giving to developing those pages, maintaining them. Given the flow of information and the vast amount of it, you don't get two chances usually. If you're not good the first time they visit you, chances are they won't be coming back.

Q: Were you getting much information back from the field about the information challenge and what works and what doesn't work in a particular culture?

WILLIAMS: Yes, it varies from place to place. To give an example of two extremes. Europe almost never asks for Stafford material. They were only interested in texts. Newspapers and European organizations have representatives here that are going to write that story and what they want is the text that gives them the context to interact with their colleagues. The headline may have taken something out of context, for example, and the story then took off on that. With the full text, they can then use that to go in and rebut either with the editor or take the issue up. So, that's one extreme. On the other, you have Africa, which thrives on the Stafford articles. That's what the writers spend most of their time doing because the news organizations there aren't as healthy, don't have the resources. That type of material does really well and is very useful in Africa. The Internet is not available everywhere because it's dependent upon the technological infrastructure of the country. At some posts we were very proud to put virtually all our printed material on the Web and then there were some countries that don't have the infrastructure to use the Web effectively are saying, "Yes, but what about us? Send us the printed pamphlet." It really does vary. Interestingly, everyone finds human beings of great use. The speaker program is popular everywhere.

Q: There is something about the spoken word, somebody getting up there and talking and responding to your questions.

WILLIAMS: Yes. During the time I was in IIP, we were sending 800-900 speakers abroad every year. That was the biggest single budget item that we had and it's going to grow.

Q: Then you retired in November of 2002.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: What are you doing now?

WILLIAMS: I'm enjoying retirement, working part-time on a project to develop a course in public diplomacy for information officers. In the past, the public diplomacy courses and those three weeks were for everybody that was going to take it. Now we've got funding to establish a three or four week course for public affairs officers and a separate one for cultural affairs officers and an eight week one for cultural affairs officers and an eight week one for information officers. I'm working on developing the eight week course with some other colleagues.

Q: Great. Thank you very much.

End of interview